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AND

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'BUT MEN MUST WORK'

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF
'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS,' 'WOOED AND MARRIED,' ETC.

London
MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
NEW YORK: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1901

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MRS. ROMNEY.

First Edition, in 1 *vol., crown* 8*vo.*, 2*s.*, *July*, 1894; *Reprinted* 1894; *Transferred to Macmillan & Co., Ltd., August*, 1898.

'BUT MEN MUST WORK.'

First Edition, in 1 *vol., crown* 8*vo.*, 2*s.*, *August*, 1892; *Transferred to Macmillan & Co., Ltd., August*, 1898.

New Edition of MRS. ROMNEY *and* BUT MEN MUST WORK, *in* 1 *vol., crown* 8*vo.*, 3*s.* 6*d.*, *June*, 1899. *Reprinted* 1901.

To

MY SISTER

MARY H. SIMPSON

This Story

IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

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MRS. ROMNEY

MRS. ROMNEY

CHAPTER I

MISS VAUGHAN OF BANKSLAND

'You are not like Cerberus, three gentlemen at once, are you?'
SHERIDAN.

MRS. ROMNEY again!

It was too provoking! The reiteration was almost offensive; it was becoming intolerable; it was really more than feminine flesh and blood could bear; it was like the scarifying sting of a small bloodthirsty insect, for it raised troublesome and invidious comparisons.

Elsie was not a patient person—not one of those docile, tractable, lovable people whom it is a delight to train and discipline, who can be drilled, exercised, and formed according to the teacher's whim and pleasure. She was as shy and wild as an unbroken colt accustomed to the sweet dews and breezes of an upland pasture, and ignorant as yet of snaffle and curb and a future master; she

was full of tricks and frolics, and not averse to small tempers, that were as brief and gusty as a storm in a teacup; and then, like most girls, she had such a good opinion of herself!

Her engagement was only four-and-twenty hours old, and she was already repenting it; at least—yes, she was almost sure that she repented it; she was out of humour with herself and Oliver; and Mrs. Romney—tiresome Mrs. Romney—was the stumbling-block, the *casus belli*, the apple of discord.

And yet what had Oliver said, after all? He had made two or three harmless remarks. In the first flush of his joy and triumph, when Elsie had yielded her perverse little self to his impassioned pleading, almost his first words had been, 'Darling, how pleased Romney will be to hear this!' and then, as though by an afterthought, 'and Mrs. Romney.' And by-and-by: 'You will like Mrs. Romney, Elsie; everyone likes my sister-in-law, she has such a big, grand nature. There is nothing little about her. I always tell Romney that he is a fortunate fellow to have such a wife.'

Well, she had not minded this; she was glad to have such a favourable report of Oliver's sister-in-law; she was curious to hear all about her new connections; so she had questioned him a little closely and anxiously on the subject of Mrs. Romney's good looks; but here he had disappointed her; she could make nothing of his descriptions: no, certainly Oliver was not good at description.

'Is Mrs. Romney handsome?—I always call her Mrs. Romney: I like the name, somehow—it pleases me better than Catherine. Well, no, not exactly—no, certainly not,' with greater decision of manner. 'My taste leans more to brown hair with a ruddy gleam in it, and eyes that are as blue and soft as—well, what am I saying to make you look so shy, Elsie? Ah, we were talking about Mrs. Romney, were we? Well, if you must have it, she is not handsome; she is dark, and her features are irregular, but she has plenty of expression, and she looks uncommonly well in evening dress. She has magnificent arms and hands—Thorold asked permission to model them for his Andromache—and she is altogether a very graceful sort of person.'

'And your brother fell in love with her?'

'Yes'—with marked gravity—'Romney fell in love with her.' Oliver had a tiresome habit of repeating his words, as though he delighted in them. 'Men will do it, you know, and the disease is very catching. Why, even I, the most sedate and stoical of Her Majesty's officers, was not invulnerable to—to——' And here it must be owned that Mrs. Romney dropped rather suddenly out of the conversation; she fell as heavily as a plummet into a well, as Milton says, 'The lazy leaden-stepping hours, whose speed is but the heavy plummet's pace;' in fact, she sank like a stone.

But the remark that had incensed Elsie, and that

had brought that impatient and very improper exclamation to her lips, 'Really, Captain Carfax, I am tired to death of Mrs. Romney before I have seen her!' was this:

'I do hope, dear, that you and Mrs. Romney will be good friends. Her being so many years older is all the better; for, having no mother or sister, you poor child, you must often want a word of advice; and Mrs. Romney is so sensible, and, then, she has so much more experience!' There was a speech to make to a spoiled heiress—to Miss Vaughan of Banksland! but it only showed an absolute want of tact on Oliver's part. Certainly Captain Carfax should have known better. For it is a well-known psychological fact, and one that commends itself specially to the female mind, that if a person hitherto unknown be unduly or overmuch eulogized and belauded, the auditor at once becomes conscious of secret antagonism and an intense desire to pick holes and find fault with such a piece of perfection, and to view him or her in a bad light. 'The white light that beats' upon the throned and sceptred being brings out one's imperfections into stronger relief. If Mrs. Romney were, in her husband's and Oliver's eyes, this paragon of womanhood, this pink and acme of perfection, this chrysolite without flaw or blemish, then she—Elsie Vaughan—would only seem a very weak, faulty little person, and it behoved her at once to take up sword and spear in her own defence.

The scene, the situation, the accessories of the picture, were simply perfect: an artist might have roved amid the whole thing and laid the foundation of his future success as a R.A., as he painted in the lights and shades of that simple, everyday, and yet wholly idyllic picture. Banksland stood high above the river; in the spring its sloping lawn looked as gay as a ballroom, with its huge horse-chestnut trees loaded with red and white blossoms, and commanded a bewitching view of deep-green meadows, where cranesbill and small yellow rock-roses grew, with wild-thyme and all manner of dainty herbage; while below the silver trail of the river gleamed between the trees, with fairy-like sails dotted here and there among the greenery. The sunshine, the blue sky, the red roofs of the boathouses, and the milky whiteness of geese waddling over the common, gave vivid colouring to the picture; while in the foreground, the garden at Banksland, Elsie's roses, and her own charming little white-gowned self, her striking personality, and the quiet, languid-looking man stretched at her feet, made up the idyl.

Oliver Carfax was by no means a handsome man. In the opinion of his mother, Lady Carfax, all the beauty of the family had centred in the person of his brother Romney, who was indeed a prince among men, though he had an Englishman's unconsciousness of the fact. If Romney were proud of anything, it was of his keen eye and straight aim, and his remarkably good taste in choosing a

wife; for the rest, he had plenty of excellent muscle, kept himself in good condition, had a horror of growing stout and of missing a shot, and rather liked to be told that he had a good tailor—men, even the best of them, having their private weakness.

Oliver looked small and pale and a trifle insignificant beside his brother's splendid proportions and magnificent physique, but he had a way with him that people could not overlook. He was a soldier, and he looked the character to the life; and he had no nonsense about him, except a habit of half closing his eyes as though he had weak sight, and a slow, indifferent way of speaking when people were strange to him, that rather aggravated them, because they fancied he was bored and did not like them, and in nine cases out of ten they were right. On Elsie herself he had made a distinctly unfavourable impression. She had seen him for the first time at the Trentham ball: it was the evening of her greatest triumph, for more than one susceptible youth had fallen an easy prey to the young heiress's charm. 'An orphan, no encumbrances, and a tidy little fortune of her own—by Jove! it will just suit me down to the ground; and as for looks, there is not a girl in the place to hold a candle to her. Plenty of go, too—just my sort.' These were the inward reflections of more than one young aspirant to Miss Vaughan's favour. Elsie was quite ready to do her part, to smile on them, and answer their neat little speeches with

the bright intelligence that seemed natural to her. She was outwardly gracious to all her partners, but she preferred the tall handsome ones; and she was secretly chagrined to find that Captain Carfax had put down his name on her programme for three valses.

Certainly she must own, however, that he danced well—exceedingly well; he had a gliding smoothness of step that suited her to a nicety; but a fair, pale man, with half-closed eyes and a quiet drawl that appeared to her a little affected, was not to her taste. He seemed half asleep, he was bored, he wanted waking up; she felt inclined to say something rude to him, something that would rouse him from his lethargy, that would make him open his eyes, and—but here Elsie grew suddenly hot, and unfurled her fan a little nervously, while she fixed her eyes on a spurred heel before her. She had had a shock. She was just going to open her lips, the first word of the flippant little speech was about to be spoken, when suddenly Captain Carfax's heavy lids had raised themselves of their own accord, and a glance so keen and searching, so full of life, had met hers, that she had become suddenly dumb and confused; and he was speaking, too, with the utmost animation and friendliness: 'I knew we should get on awfully; your step just suits mine, Miss Vaughan. Shall we have another turn? The last was perfect. If you are not tired —thanks;' and she was whirled round the room again—no, not whirled; that word would hardly

convey the smooth, firm precision with which Captain Carfax guided her through the maze of dancers; it was the very poetry of motion. He did not say much to her—Oliver was one who talked by fits and starts—but somehow his silence was eloquent and pregnant with meaning; a sort of weight attached to his simplest sentences. When he said, later on, 'You must have an ice,' Elsie somehow felt that that frigid form of refreshment had become an imperative necessity to her. There was quite a crowd round the door when she made her appearance from the cloak-room. She had a bewildering blue hood trimmed with white fur that dazzled the young men's eyes. A blue hood ever after seemed to them the loveliest article of feminine attire that they had ever seen. 'There is rather a deep step; let me assist you;' and Captain Carfax was by her side. No one had seen him push his way to the front, yet a moment before he had been in the hall. Elsie could have declared that her fan had been in her hand when she left the cloak-room; it was one she greatly prized, for it had belonged to her mother. The loss took away all the pleasure of a successful evening, and she laid down her programme and her gloves on her toilet-table with a sense that Solomon was right after all, and that all was vanity and vexation of spirit; and there was certainly a suspicion of moisture in her bright eyes as she arrived at this lugubrious conclusion. Her delight was unbounded, then, when the next after-

noon, just as Morgan was setting the tea-table, Captain Carfax was announced, and she saw him entering her drawing-room with the fan in his hand. His moustache twitched a little as he heard her exclaim, 'Oh, the dear thing! How good of you to bring it, Captain Carfax! Where did you find it? Did I drop it in the hall or on the steps? or did I leave it in the cloak-room?' Elsie remembered afterwards that none of these questions had been answered. The finding of the fan remained a mystery until, months afterwards, Oliver informed her that he had quietly taken it out of her hand as she was getting into the carriage.

'I wanted a pretext for calling. It was rather a clever device, eh, Elsie?'

'No, sir, it was nothing of the kind!' she returned indignantly. 'It was an infamous robbery! You stole my fan! And I cried—I actually cried over the loss.'

'Oh, come now, no exaggeration; exchange is no robbery—I learned that in the nursery. If I stole your fan, you had stolen my heart already. It was love at first sight. When I wrote my name in your programme I knew it was all up with your humble servant.'

Elsie never knew why she had accepted Captain Carfax, which she did quite meekly the moment he asked her. She told him afterwards rather crossly that he had given her no chance—metaphorically, he had carried her off her feet.

'I did not in the least wish to be engaged,' she

remarked thoughtfully, as he was about to bid her good-night that evening, and her tone was a little reproachful. The spoiled child had always been used to speak her mind on every occasion.

Oliver had risen, but he sat down again and caressed his moustache. It was not much of a moustache, being sandy in colour and a trifle wiry.

'No, I suppose not,' he observed, after an interval of silence.

'You put too strong a pressure on me. I always told Uncle George'—Uncle George was Elsie's guardian and sole relative—'that I never intended to be engaged until I was three-and-twenty.'

'Ah, we often make a false shot,' he returned cheerfully. 'I once told Romney that I was cut out for an old bachelor, but he did not believe me; so we were both wrong, you see. You will find it awfully jolly being engaged, when you once get used to it; I like it already.'

And with this he took his leave. Elsie made up her mind that she would send him a note the next morning releasing him from his engagement. 'I promised too quickly,' she thought of saying. 'I should prefer to have my three years of freedom, after all.' But she somehow lacked courage to send the note; but, being an impulsive girl, she showed it to him when he came, just to see how he took it; but he only read it and screwed it up in his hand, smiling, and went on with the conversation. He hoped Romney would ask him to

take her down to the Frythe. He would have a month's leave of absence in June, and it would be capital sport driving her in Romney's dogcart, or riding with her about Fordham; and he drew such a pleasant description of the Frythe and Fordham that Elsie quite longed for the invitation, and the talk flowed on smoothly until Oliver's injudicious speech about Mrs. Romney awoke her smouldering ire.

'I am quite sure that I shall detest Mrs. Romney.'

Elsie looked provokingly pretty as she made this speech. The sunshine was in her eyes, and she had contrived a screen with Oliver's hat, the truth being that he had offered it to her for the purpose. 'My object in life is to get sunburnt,' he assured her solemnly, as she looked apologetically at his closely-cropped head. His hair looked almost bleached in the sunshine. A phrenologist, however, would have been profoundly satisfied with the shape and formation, the bumps of concentrativeness, cautiousness, firmness, and benevolence being well developed.

Oliver had a pebble in his hand; the gravel path was behind him, and offered him a store of small missiles. He had made up his mind to hit a knob of wood in a garden-chair at some distance. When Elsie had uttered her fractious little speech, he took aim, and the pebble grazed the knob.

'Good,' he observed briefly, and his tone showed self-satisfaction. Then he turned lightly on his

side, and took Elsie's hand. 'You are very young, dear,' he said, in an amused tone, 'but you will grow older and wiser every year. I rather admire your downright speeches; they are so thoroughly honest. Poor Mrs. Romney! Well, I will not say any more about her just now; she shall plead her own cause.'

Oliver was really behaving very generously, but he had only been engaged twenty-four hours, and he was far too happy to quarrel with his *fiancée*. He was more in love with Elsie than the girl knew, or even guessed. She had not the faintest notion of the real nature of the man to whom she had plighted her troth—of his depth of character, and his strong tenacity of purpose. His manner was misleading; his assumed languor hid him like a mask. Captain Carfax did not always choose to be understood; he had not yet willed to reveal himself to his young betrothed. But in spite of his generosity, Elsie felt herself aggrieved. Miss Vaughan of Banksland was an important person. She did not want to be forgiven and patted on the head like a naughty little girl, so she said severely:

'You talk so much of Mrs. Romney, and so little of your mother. I am more anxious to see Lady Carfax. Miss Dalton told me that she is very handsome.'

'She is a good-looking woman,' he returned quietly. 'You know my father is an invalid, Elsie, and my mother devotes herself to him.

That is why Romney lives at the Frythe, instead of having a house of his own, that he may be at hand to manage everything. The house is so big, and my mother wished it. She and my father have the east wing to themselves.'

'I wonder Mrs. Romney likes such an arrangement,' observed Elsie, a little disdainfully.

If Oliver had asked her to live with his parents —well, she would have had but one answer to that.

'Mrs. Romney is one who never consults her own wishes,' returned Oliver gravely. 'Romney said that it was his duty to consider his parents, and that he would like to live at the Frythe; so she said at once that she wished it, too. Now, then, shall I take you for a row on the river?'

But he seemed so sure of Elsie's consent that he jumped up from the grass and shook himself, as though to prepare for action. Elsie half thought of saying 'No,' by way of testing her power; but she changed her mind, and arrayed herself instead in a smart boating-dress and a sailor hat that suited her to perfection, and they spent the rest of the afternoon among the swans and sedges.

CHAPTER II

CAPTAIN CARFAX HAS HIS WAY

'MUR. We are men, my liege.
MAC. Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men.'
Macbeth.

ONE lovely afternoon in June, when every winged creature, great or small, was doing its little best to swell creation's mighty symphony—its 'Lieder ohne Wörte,' as someone has said—and all young things were gambolling on the earth out of mere wantonness and exuberance of life, Elsie Vaughan sat in the corner of a first-class compartment bemoaning her hard fate with silent bitterness and self-pity, and deriving an immense though morbid pleasure from the process.

Elsie was perusing her own feelings and prospects with the same concentration of industry with which Captain Carfax was seemingly studying his *Times;* but she was too engrossed with her own thoughts to notice sundry keen and amused glances levelled in her direction. When Elsie looked at Oliver, which she did occasionally, rather haughtily and with a touch of defiance, he was always engrossed in his leader, and presented a blank and expressionless visage. At such moments, Oliver looked decidedly plain. Elsie considered herself the most miserable of girls, because she had been engaged three whole weeks, and had not yet made

up her mind whether she liked or detested her bonds, and was now on her way to be interviewed by Oliver's relatives. Being a shy little mortal, in spite of her conceit, Elsie was in a state of nervous collapse, the thought of Mrs. Romney being the sole irritant. She was more than ever determined that Mrs. Romney would be her *bête noire*, the wolf in sheep's clothing who would ruin all her pleasure at Fordham. Elsie had come to the conclusion that an engaged person resembled a bird with its wings clipped; her flights were curtailed and regulated by a masculine will. Miss Vaughan had at times a humiliating consciousness that she had found her master. Now and then she felt as though she almost hated this quiet, smooth-tongued man who made her pretty speeches and told her that she was young. As Elsie was nineteen, she objected to be considered young; besides which, Oliver was only five-and-twenty—which proved he was not a Methuselah—and ought not to give himself airs. But on the whole she respected him, and her hatred must have been in embryo, as they had enjoyed a good deal of boating together during his brief visits to Banksland; and his letters had been eagerly read and answered with a great deal of painstaking care, the slightest erasure necessitating a clean copy. How tenderly Captain Carfax had laid aside these neat girlish epistles, with their faint fragrance of rose-leaves, their formal beginnings and small stilted sentences, and the rush of words at the end! Elsie's post-

script resembled herself, and revealed her meaning with blunt honesty. When she told Oliver that she was not sure that she wanted to see him, that she was quite happy with Uncle George, but that he might come if he liked, she meant every word she said, and Oliver believed her; but he came all the same, and made himself so agreeable that she was sorry when he returned to Aldershot. Elsie hardly knew how Oliver managed her, but she was conscious that she was managed. The idea fretted her at times, and brought on one of her contradictory humours. On one or two occasions she had behaved very badly to her *fiancée*, but he had never seemed to notice it. Once the snub had been publicly administered, and her chaperon, Mrs. Fielding, had given her a sharp reprimand; for she was a determined sort of person, and had known Elsie's mother. 'How could you treat Captain Carfax so rudely, Elsie? I was quite ashamed of you. You are far too old to sulk like a baby,' she had said, so severely that Elsie had first quarrelled with her, and had then burst into tears, and in the end had begged Oliver's pardon. Perhaps her worst punishment was the way Oliver received her apology.

'There is no need of this between you and me, darling,' he had said quietly. 'I understand you better than you do yourself. But don't try it on at the Frythe, or my mother and Mrs. Romney will think you younger than you are.' Self-command is learned later in life; it was in this way

Oliver took his revenge. For a day and a half Elsie went about her own house like a whipped kitten, and Captain Carfax and Mrs. Fielding exchanged glances. Oliver knew that the object of his idolatry was only a child-woman, and had not grown into her full stature of womanhood; but nothing could exceed his reverence. She was crude, airified, and full of whimseys; but then, as he told Mrs. Romney, her mother had died before Elsie was eight years old. 'Mr. Brudenell—Uncle George, as she calls him—is an old bachelor, and does not understand girls; and Mrs. Fielding, good creature as she is and devoted to Elsie, is only a married old maid. Ask Romney what I mean by that, if you do not understand me.' But Mrs. Romney thought that she understood Oliver's meaning very well, and put down his letter with a stifled sigh.

'Men of Oliver's calibre like to educate their wives—at least, discipline them—before they marry them,' she said later on to her husband as they discussed the letter, as they discussed most things, in Romney's smoking-room. 'A full-fledged wife would not suit him at all. She is more a child than a woman; I can read that between the lines; but Oliver will love her all the better for the trouble she gives him. Oliver is a Carfax.' And, somehow, the last few words were as soft as a caress.

'I always said you were the cleverest woman I ever knew, Catherine,' returned her husband

admiringly. 'You ought to have married Oliver, for as far as cleverness goes you two are a match: Oliver, confound the fellow's impudence! has more brains in his little finger than I have in my whole body.' But, as usual when Romney made these humble speeches, his wife only looked at him with worshipping eyes: he was a king among men, and yet his Kitty, as he loved to call her, satisfied him.

Elsie's great fault in Captain Carfax's eyes was that she was an heiress; this was a serious blemish, and nearly prevented him from proposing to her; but he learned two or three proverbs by heart, such as, 'Gold is dross,' 'Manners makythe man,' 'Faint heart ne'er won fair lady,' and a few others; and when he felt his pride was sufficiently well nourished, and Elsie's filthy lucre had shrunk to its right proportions in the scale of the universe, he made tracks, as the people say, and his chariot-wheels ceased to drive heavily.

So much in life depends on one's own philosophy. If Diogenes had been thin-skinned, and had cared more for people's opinion than for his own stoicism, he would hardly have lived in a tub with contented equanimity: and even Simeon Stylites, unsupported by a supernatural love of asceticism and maceration, might have repented and bemoaned himself on his pillar. No one could long look dignified in the pillory, even before the rotten eggs appeared; dignity requires the use of the limbs, or at least the free carriage of the head. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus remarks somewhat

pithily, 'Constantly, and, if it be possible, on the occasion of every impression on the soul, apply to it the principles of Physic, of Ethic, and of Dialectic.' This is vague, at least to the feminine understanding. He is better where he says, 'No man will hinder thee from living according to the reason of thy own nature: nothing will happen to thee contrary to the reason of the universal nature.'

Captain Carfax's bumps, or, rather, organs of acquisitiveness and firmness, being unusually prominent, nothing, humanly speaking, could hinder him from making love to the young heiress; and as Oliver generally succeeded when he gave his mind to a thing, Elsie's chances of escape were nil.

He was admiring her with all his heart at that moment. If she looked so pretty in the dumps, he was the luckiest fellow in the world; for, of course, every woman had her little tempers, and so long as she did not look ugly or sour, and the temper was not of the sullen or vindictive kind, he thought he could put up with it; but when Elsie's mouth drooped at the corners in that irresistible way, his stoicism, albeit of the Diogenes or Simeon Stylites sort, vanished in a moment. He was absurd, he was a fool, but he could not bear the child to look unhappy, and so—and so—but any lover over age could predict exactly how Oliver would act, and what he would say.

'Do you feel better now, darling—just a tiny bit happier?'

'Yes—oh! I don't know;' and then, clasping

her little gray-gloved hands, which had somehow got mixed up with Oliver's, she continued rather hysterically, 'but I have been so dreadfully unhappy—and you did not care.'

'How do you know? Were you looking at me?'

Oliver put this atrocious question quite calmly, but Elsie flamed up in a moment:

'No, of course not. Why should I look at you, when you have made me so miserable? I never wanted to come to Fordham; you ought not to have asked me to do such a thing; no girl ought to be put in such a position; and I have been crying. What will Mrs. Romney think of me? Oh, if I were only safe with Uncle George and Aunt Minnie!"—this being Mrs. Fielding's sobriquet; and here Elsie dabbed her face with a small modicum of French cambric that she called a handkerchief.

'You poor little tired child!' was Oliver's caressing answer, 'don't be afraid of Mrs. Romney: she will be very good to you—everyone will be good to you, first for my sake, and then for your own. Why,' continued Oliver, keeping the *bonne bouche* for the last, 'they will fall in love with you the moment they see you; no one could help it,' finished the artful young man, as Elsie bridled and a little rose-leaf flush came into her pale cheeks.

'Oh, do you think so?' she gasped; but she never completed her sentence, for, with Oliver still holding her hand as though he had a right to do it, the train suddenly slackened, and a voice

that sounded wonderfully familiar said: 'Here they are, Kitty—first-class, too, and I have won my bet;' and the handsomest man she had ever seen in her life was waving a straw hat with a white ribbon around it.

Oliver took it very coolly: he never even dropped Elsie's hand, but the motion of his elbow gave him the appearance of helping her to rise.

'Actually Romney has put in an appearance! How are you, old man? Pretty fit? That's right. Elsie, this is my big brother, who used to bully me when I was a small boy; people take us for twins now.' But here Oliver found himself unceremoniously pushed out of the way.

'Don't listen to him, Miss Vaughan; he was always a precocious little beggar, and told no end of fibs. Well, I am delighted to see you. Where is that wife of mine? Catherine! Kitty! What has happened to the woman? she seems in a fix.'

Mrs. Romney was certainly in a fix: she had been following her husband, pressing towards the railway-carriage, when she became entangled with a lady, a boy, and a dog: the lady was leading the dog, a small, unhappy-looking pug, and the chain had caught Mrs. Romney's jacket button; the boy, who was carrying cakes and butter-scotch, collided with them both, and the cakes strewed the platform. Mrs. Romney, who had a kind heart, and was touched by the lad's piteous dismay, had stopped to make herself useful, and all but one piece of butter-scotch had been replaced on the

tray. Then she gathered herself up, smiling, and kissed Elsie before everyone.

'How nice of you to come! Oliver was a good boy to bring you. We are all going to spoil you dreadfully. Romney, I can hear Jess is fidgeting. Has Scott collected the luggage? Oliver, please put Elsie into the wagonette; Romney is going to drive. I must just see if my cake-boy is quite happy in his mind.'

'Awfully stiff and conventional, isn't she?' whispered Oliver, as he helped Elsie into the wagonette; and then he went in search of his sister-in-law. The Squire had gathered up the reins, and was looking complacently at the broad brown backs of the handsome pair of horses before him, then he flecked a fly off Jess's left ear. Elsie was too shy to address him; she had never seen such a magnificent man in her life: she was relieved when she saw Oliver and Mrs. Romney hurrying up to them. Mrs. Romney was flushed and out of breath.

'So sorry to keep you waiting, dear, but accidents will happen. A child fell down, and we had to pick her up and console her with some chocolate—such a dear little mite! Are you quite comfortable in that corner, Elsie? You see I do not mean to be formal. Don't trouble to talk if you're too tired; I hate people to talk to me when I am tired, and I have a hundred things to say to Oliver: we are tremendous cronies, he and I;' and Mrs. Romney beamed on her brother-in-law.

Elsie was thankful to be left in peace for a few moments: her ideas wanted readjusting. This was not the Mrs. Romney she had been picturing to herself, the 'graceful sort of person' who was Oliver's paragon, this talkative young woman in an old gray dust-cloak and an unbecoming hat—a hat that quite hid the smooth dark hair and broad forehead. Certainly Mrs. Romney was not handsome, not even pretty; one could almost call her plain. She had a frank mouth and a pleasant voice, but she talked so dreadfully fast, and seemed to manage everybody. How could such a handsome man fall in love with such a plain woman? Then she remembered the arms and hands that had been modelled for Andromache, and felt that her criticism was a little premature; no one could look well in an old gray dust-cloak.

'Is this Fordham?' she asked, by way of making herself agreeable. Oliver would like to hear her talk; she must summon up courage and introduce a subject.

Mrs. Romney was ready with her answer in a moment: 'Good gracious no, child! Fordham is a village. This is Draycott, our county town. We have a railway-station, but there are so few suitable trains that my husband thought it would be better to drive from Draycott. Are you fond of the country, Elsie? Can you make yourself happy in a small, quiet place? There will be little to amuse you, I fear. At Dene you had the river and boating. Ah, I know Dene well, and it

is near London. Fordham will seem quite dead-and-alive after Dene.'

'Oh no; I love the country,' returned Elsie eagerly. But just then, just as she was getting into the swing of conversation, when the ice was beginning to break between her and the formidable Mrs. Romney, the Squire's voice was heard peremptorily ordering Kitty to look sharp and be ready to bow to the Ferards, and a barouche full of smiling, nodding young women passed them, and four pairs of inquisitive eyes looked full at Elsie.

'Some neighbours of ours, who live at Castlebank. Romney is devoted to Laura Ferard—aren't you, Romney? What am I to look at next, dear?' for the Squire was signalling vigorously, while he gave Jess a cut with the whip for her bad behaviour in shying at a tinker's brazier. 'Oh, I understand. Elsie, do you see this gentleman who is following us in the dogcart, and who is trying to overtake us if Romney will let him? This is our next neighbour, Mr. Lockhart. He lives in a pretty little cottage called The Hut.'

'Rab Lockhart is a character,' put in Oliver. 'Shall we enlighten her, Mrs. Romney, or shall we allow her to find out Rab for herself? Halloo! Black Madge has bolted. Rab means mischief. Hold hard, Romney, old fellow; don't let the browns get excited, or we shall all land in the ditch;' and, thus admonished, the Squire reined in his horses.

'I always said Black Madge had the devil in

her,' shouted Mr. Lockhart in rather a shrill voice as the dogcart came alongside the wagonette. 'The top of the morning to you, Squire; your humble servant, Mrs. Romney; ah, my friend the Captain—and——' Here the triumphant Jehu ceased waving his white hat, and stared hard at Elsie. Mrs. Romney and Oliver exchanged looks, but neither spoke. A close observer would have suggested that both were bent on mischief. The Squire frowned, and drove on in rather a testy manner. Mr. Lockhart, who seemed waiting for an introduction, jerked his reins as a hint to Black Madge, and continued staring.

Elsie felt inclined to laugh, he was such a droll-looking little man. His bald head, as he raised his hat, was as bare as an ivory ball, save for the fringe of tow-coloured hair which, with a small, stubbly moustache, was his only hirsute ornament. He was small of stature, and his face was as round and chubby as a boy's, and had a shining, polished look, as though soap as well as water were freely used. His gray overcoat, white waistcoat, and large hothouse flower proved that Mr. Lockhart took care of his outer man. Elsie began to feel the persistent gaze of his prominent light blue eyes somewhat oppressive. She drew herself up, and made a remark to Oliver.

'How far have we to go?' she asked. But, to her annoyance, Mr. Lockhart answered her:

'How far, Miss—humph—I beg your pardon, but I did not catch your name'—meaningly. A

dead silence on Oliver's and Mrs. Romney's part. Then, in a baffled and humble manner: 'We are only a mile from Fordham; we have just passed the last milestone. We shall be in the Frythe in another quarter of an hour, Miss—humph-humph.'

CHAPTER III

AN ORDEAL

'Yet do I fear thy nature:
It is too full of the milk of human kindness.'
Macbeth.

'My name——' began Elsie haughtily, but just at that moment Mrs. Romney begged her in an excited manner to look behind her at the funny little litter of black pigs in an orchard they were passing.

'Do look at them; they cannot be more than three days old. Did you ever see such darling black infants?'

'I am thinking of buying one of them,' observed Mr. Lockhart. 'Do you like roast sucking-pig, Mrs. Romney?' And as that lady made a gesture of disgust, he continued in a persuasive manner to Elsie: 'I have no pigsty at The Hut. It is a great mistake; but I am intending to build one. Perhaps, Miss—humph-humph—when you and Mrs. Romney do me the honour of a little visit you will allow me to point out the site—— Eh, what, Squire?'

'You might have invited me, Rab,' returned the Squire, quite restored to good humour, and entering into the joke. 'I never allow Mrs. Romney to go anywhere without me, for fear of her getting into mischief. You are not a safe man, Rab — a gay young spark and lady-killer like you! No, no; I could not trust Mrs. Romney.'

The little man looked delighted at this chaff. He rubbed his hands together, bringing his whip into such smart collision with his face that the lash stung him.

'You are jesting, Squire. It is just the Squire's fun, isn't it, Captain? Not trust Mrs. Romney! Ha! ha! We know better, don't we, madam? How about that meeting over at Draycott at eight o'clock on Thursday evening?'

'How about the inventions of you gentlemen?' returned Mrs. Romney, with a light laugh. 'Romney dear, please do not let the horses go to sleep. Whitefoot is so dreadfully lazy. You must tell Scott to dock his oats; he is growing fat.'

'Fat!' returned the Squire irritably, for this was touching him in a sore place. 'What on earth do you mean, Catherine? Whitefoot is in splendid condition. Look at his glossy coat; and as for the pace, why, that mare of Lockhart's is all in a fret and a foam with keeping up with us. But there is no pleasing you women.'

'No, dear, we are troublesome creatures,' con-

tinued Mrs. Romney gently. Then she stood up in the wagonette, and, steadying herself by laying a hand on her husband's shoulder, whispered something to him that must have been conciliatory, to judge from his pleased expression.

'None of your blarney, Kitty,' they heard him say; and then Mrs. Romney laughed and sat down again, but Elsie thought she looked suddenly very tired.

The dogcart had dropped behind a moment, as a cart was approaching them, and Elsie, relieved from the admiring gaze of the prominent blue eyes, began to take note of her surroundings. They had just passed a beautiful church and churchyard, and were driving through a trim, bright-looking village. Elsie had a rapid impression of cream-coloured cottages with gardens full of roses and tall blue delphiniums and masses of gray and mauve campanulas; the air was perfumed with honeysuckle and roses, and as they passed the schoolhouse a small round-faced child in a big white sun-bonnet toddled after the wagonette with a large nosegay of honeysuckle and dark-red clover in her hand.

'For dear ma'ams,' she gasped, and would have been under the hoofs of Black Madge the next moment had not Oliver leaned over the wagonette and dexterously hitched up the little one by her petticoats. No one could tell how he did it. Mrs. Romney bit her lips to keep in a shriek, and watched him with paling face, while Black Madge

snorted and reared; and then Oliver, breathing hard, sat down again, with the child in his arms. The Squire had stopped his horses at Elsie's exclamation, and was waiting for an explanation, but no one gave it to him. Mrs. Romney was on her knees, kissing the child and crying over the flowers, and Oliver sat languidly fanning himself. Elsie, in spite of her dislike to public demonstration, caught his hand in passing, and gave it a little squeeze.

'Oh, Oliver, how splendid!'

'Wasn't it, Miss—humph-humph?' exclaimed Mr. Lockhart, with a chuckle. 'Never saw such a thing in my life. The Captain might have spent his life in picking up children; quite a practised hand, so cool and collected. Gave you a bit of strain, though.' But Oliver shook his head. He was pushing back little Jenny's sun-bonnet to see her curls, a liberty which Jenny, true to her sex, resented.

'Don't want gentlemans. I dot the fowers for dear ma'ams.' But she ceased struggling, and nestled contentedly up to Mrs. Romney.

'Scene number three,' observed the Squire phlegmatically, when Jenny was safely delivered into her mother's keeping. 'I never saw a woman with such a taste for brats as Kitty has. I have seen her kiss even the dirty ones,' he continued confidentially to no one in particular.

They had gone through the length and breadth of Fordham, and were just passing a little stream

bordered by hart's-tongue ferns and large ox-eye daisies, when a substantial red-brick house with a high-walled garden, and an old clock in the middle of the building, came in view. A groom was at the gate watching for them, and the next minute they were driving up a broad gravel sweep to the entrance.

'Welcome to Frythe, Miss Vaughan!' exclaimed the Squire, as he threw down the reins; but his wife said softly: 'You must call her Elsie, Romney, and then she will feel herself at home!' and Oliver remarked under his breath: 'Hear, hear!'

'We shall find Gran and Sir Henry in the drawing-room,' observed Mrs. Romney, as she led the way through the wide, handsome hall, with its high carved mantelpiece and oak settles, down a corridor full of flowering plants. 'Gran generally has tea in the east wing,' observed Mrs. Romney, 'but she said that they must be in the drawing-room to welcome you this afternoon. You know, of course, that poor Sir Henry is a sad invalid?'

'Oliver told me so,' returned Elsie, with a relapse into shyness. She wanted to stop and look out of the window. Some peacocks were sunning themselves on the terrace among the roses; a smooth green lawn led to the edge of a small lake, with a delightful clump of trees underneath which some rare water-fowl were disporting themselves: it all looked so peaceful and beautiful. But Mrs. Romney put her hand through the girl's arm and hurried her on.

'We had better get the introductions over,' she said, with a smile. 'Gran is a little formidable until you get used to her, but she is a dear woman, and one soon gets accustomed to her dignified ways.'

As Mrs. Romney spoke, they entered a sunny little ante-room, with an arched doorway leading into the drawing-room.

Elsie thought it a charming room, it was full of such delightful nooks and corners. One deep bay-window had a circular cushioned seat, and another was furnished with a low tea-table and cosy-looking chairs. A stately-looking woman, with fine aristocratic features, and gray curls piled on her forehead after the prevailing fashion, was sitting knitting beside her husband's invalid-chair. Sir Henry was a thin, nervous-looking man, many years older than his wife. In his youth he had been handsome, and even now, in his moments of comparative ease from the painful complaint that was slowly bringing him to the grave, he showed himself a polished and cultured gentleman, though the record of suffering was plainly stamped on his wan face, and there was latent irritability in his pale-blue eyes.

In her earlier days Lady Carfax had been a brilliant and worldly woman, but her husband's affliction had subdued her, and for some years she had simply devoted herself to him.

She rose a little formally to receive her son's *fiancée*, but before Oliver, who was following them,

could speak, Mrs. Romney's frank, cheerful voice was again heard:

'Here we are, Gran, punctual to a moment; and you must be very kind to this poor child, for she is tired out with all the strangeness.'

'I hope that Oliver's belongings will not long be strange to you, my dear,' returned Lady Carfax, kissing her with calm sedateness; and then Sir Henry held out a cold, shaking hand.

'We are very pleased to see you,' he said, with old-fashioned courtesy. 'We are quiet people for young folk. I am a sad invalid, as you see, but Lady Carfax takes great care of me. Oliver, my boy, will you just wheel me out of the sun? Sit down, young lady, and make yourself comfortable. Catherine will look after you; she likes looking after people.'

'Yes, dear Sir Henry, so I do.' And Mrs. Romney passed her hand caressingly over the wrinkled forehead as she passed his chair. 'Now, Gran, I am going to give you some tea. Elsie, take this little chair beside me, and Oliver will wait on you.' And as Elsie gratefully slid into the little sheltered nook assigned her, she almost envied Mrs. Romney her power of putting people at their ease.

'How does she do it?' thought Elsie, when ten minutes had elapsed and she found herself listening to an animated discussion between Mrs. Romney and her mother-in-law on some purchases she had made that afternoon. She was even

inveigled into giving her opinion on the merits of art serges, though she was a little frightened when she discovered that Lady Carfax differed from her.

'I am too old-fashioned to share your modern taste, my dear,' she said, with a sort of gentle contempt in her voice. 'Catherine is always telling me how old-fashioned I am—are you not, my love?'

'Yes, Gran; and you take all my rude speeches with the patience of an angel. Elsie, this mother-in-law of mine has the sweetest temper in the world; but you will soon find this out for yourself. Does anyone know what Romney is doing with himself? Ah, there you are, my lord and master!' as the Squire entered, and Sir Henry's face brightened perceptibly.

'How are you, father?' he asked, as he took his cup of tea from his wife's hand. 'We don't often see you on this side of the house, but I suppose it is in Miss Vaughan's honour. Ah! I see Kitty has taken you under her wing, Miss Vaughan; she always does that sort of thing. Do you remember, mother, when I introduced Kitty to you under the same sort of circumstances? It was three years ago—eh, Kitty?' And a blush came to Mrs. Romney's cheek.

'Only three years? It seems longer,' she said dreamily.

'You are paying my son a poor compliment, Catherine,' returned Lady Carfax with a smile;

'but we understand her—do we not, Romney?' And the Squire laughed.

'Kitty is very Irish at times, but I have learned to translate her speeches.' And Mrs. Romney, who had seemed a little abstracted, roused herself at her husband's speech.

'I only meant that three years seemed too short to hold so much happiness,' she said, with a simplicity that seemed natural to her. 'Gran, if you will excuse me, I should like to take Elsie to her room. Come with me, dear.' And, as they left the room together, she said confidentially: 'I was so sorry for you, you poor child, you looked so frightened when Gran kissed you. Gran is very imposing, and she makes one feel rather small at times; but you will soon get fond of her. You did not like me at first, did you? But you will find me a very comfortable sort of person.' And, after this frank speech, Mrs. Romney pointed out to her the various arrangements for her comfort in the spacious, well-furnished room assigned for her use, and then, commending her to the care of a pleasant-looking young woman who was to act as her maid, Mrs. Romney departed, promising to return presently.

Elsie dressed herself quickly, and then, ignoring Mrs. Romney's request that she would remain quietly in her room and rest until she fetched her, she opened her door, and walked quietly down the corridor. A window-recess at the far end attracted her, but as she passed a half-open door

Mrs. Romney's voice called to her: 'Is that you, Elsie? Will you come and see my boy?' And as Elsie entered the nursery she heard the little ripple of baby laughter.

For a moment she felt bewildered. Could the voluble lady in the gray dust-cloak be transformed into this graceful-looking woman in black, who was standing in the middle of the room, with the fair-haired, blue-eyed child in her arms?

Elsie glanced at her doubtfully, at the white unadorned neck that looked so dazzling fair, and at the beautifully-shaped head with its smooth coils of dark hair; and she felt Oliver's description had been correct: Mrs. Romney, in spite of her lack of beauty, was certainly an attractive woman.

'Is not Harry a darling?' she exclaimed, as Elsie kissed the child. 'He is exactly like Romney—everyone says so; he does not take after his mother at all. How pretty you look, Elsie! You ought always to wear white. I dare say Oliver has told you that; he has such taste. Romney never knows what dress I have on, but Oliver always notices one's clothes. If he takes a dislike to a thing, he never lets you have a moment's peace.'

'May I have your boy a moment?' pleaded Elsie; but Harry hid his face on his mother's shoulder, and refused to make friends with Aunt Elsie, in spite of all entreaties.

'But you must not call me that,' observed

Elsie, in rather a distressed tone. 'Suppose Oliver were to hear you.'

'Nonsense!' returned Mrs. Romney vigorously; 'my baby-boy must be taught to love his aunt. What a delicious child you are, Elsie! You answer exactly to Oliver's description; you have not disappointed me at all. I am quite fond of you already, and yet you do not care for me a bit; but I shall make you like me. If I try, I can always make people care for me. Oliver says I am a regular witch.'

'Oliver is always talking about you. He praises you to the skies.' Elsie's tone was slightly dubious. Mrs. Romney, who was rocking her boy gently, gave her a quick, comprehending glance.

'I shall tell Oliver that he is a goose. Of course, you were prejudiced against me; but you must try and forget all his nonsense, and take me on my own merits. I have not been disagreeable to you yet, have I?'

'No, indeed; you have been very kind,' returned Elsie, in a conscience-stricken tone. She was sensible all at once of a curious revulsion of feeling; she was not quite so sure that she disliked Mrs. Romney. To get rid of her embarrassment, she added hastily: 'I am afraid that I shall never feel at my ease with Lady Carfax.'

'Oh yes, you will,' returned Mrs. Romney, with one of the sudden brilliant smiles that seemed to light up her face. 'Let me tell you something.

Three years ago I went through the same terrible ordeal. I did not see Gran until Romney and I were married;' and, as Elsie looked rather surprised at this, she continued, a little hurriedly: 'I will tell you all about that some day. My husband's people were not pleased with his choice, and Romney refused to take me to the Frythe until he could introduce me as his wife. You see, Elsie'—with a sudden proud curl of her lip—'I was not an heiress like you, and both Sir Henry and Lady Carfax thought that Romney had done very badly for himself in marrying me.'

'How dreadful it must have been for you!'

'Well, it was pretty bad. I shall never forget Romney's face as he stood there while Gran made her stiff, conventional little speeches: "Mrs. Romney must be tired. Had we suffered from the dust? Would I go to my room and rest?" And all the time there was such a lump in my throat that I could scarcely answer.'

'And Mr. Romney did not help you?'

'No, dear; he was only vexed with me for my awkwardness. He was so uncomfortable himself, poor fellow! that it made him quite cross. At last I could bear it no longer; I wanted to burst out crying, or run out of the room, but I burst out laughing instead. Oh, how horrified Romney looked! But I think I should have died if I had not laughed, and I said: "Please—please do not look at me as though you hated me, for I mean to love you with all my heart, because you are

Romney's mother;" and I threw my arms round her, and kissed her as though she had been my own darling mother, and—would you believe it, Elsie?—the dear old thing actually cried, and said that she did not mean to be unkind; and Romney got sweet-tempered in a moment, and petted us and said nice things to us both, and Gran and I sat hand in hand for the rest of the evening. What do you think of that, Elsie? Ah, there is the gong, and I can hear Oliver running up three steps at a time to fetch his lady-love.'

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST EVENING AT THE FRYTHE

'Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short.'
Richard II.

SIR HENRY always took his meals in his own room, and Lady Carfax, who had long ago resigned her place to her daughter-in-law, sat at her son's right hand, while Elsie found herself seated between Mrs. Romney and Oliver.

'I told Romney that we would not stand on ceremony,' observed his wife in a whisper, which was overheard by the Squire's sharp ears, for he remarked in a discontented tone, as he unfolded his napkin:

'I wish I had asked Rab to dine with us this evening. It is too bad of you to desert me in this

way, Miss Vaughan, and take up with my wife. You will find that Kitty rules us all; even Oliver is under her thumb: so I advise you to look out; you will have no will of your own as long as you are at the Frythe.'

'I warn you to take no notice of my son's speech,' observed Lady Carfax, in her soft, precise manner; 'he teases Catherine dreadfully, but you will soon find out for yourself that he can do nothing without her.' And she looked affectionately at her daughter-in-law. 'We did not want Mr. Lockhart here this evening, did we, Catherine?'

'No, indeed,' with energy. 'Elsie, I hope you are aware that you have made a conquest: at the risk of making Oliver jealous, I must inform you that poor Rab has lost his heart at first sight.'

Elsie looked so mystified at this that there was a general laugh at her expense; but no one enlightened her, until she and Mrs. Romney were taking a turn on the lawn while the gentlemen lighted their cigarettes in the porch, when Mrs. Romney explained the joke:

'I was quite serious when I said poor Rab had lost his heart, Elsie. Rab is a very eccentric character; he is a droll, harmless little man, and we are all very fond of him, for he is the best-natured fellow in the world; but he has a mania for falling in love. To my knowledge he has proposed to three of our guests, and has been invariably refused.'

'How can he be so absurd?'

'Absurd! there is something pathetic to me in Rab's persevering endeavours to get married. He has a pretty little house, and a good income, and the kindest of natures; but he is so droll-looking, such a bald-headed boy, as Oliver calls him, that no one will have anything to say to him, though I have told Romney over and over again that Rab would make the best husband in the world.'

'I thought him very rude to stare at me so,' returned Elsie. 'Why did you refuse to take his hints? He wanted to find out my name.'

'Of course he did, but Oliver and I were bent on playing him a trick. He makes love to all our young lady guests, but he would not venture on such a liberty with Oliver's *fiancée*. Was it not delicious to hear his Miss Humph-humph! Poor Rab, how his face will fall when he hears your name! He wants your advice on the subject of pigsties, does he not, Elsie?'

'Mr. Lockhart must be very dense not to have understood that you were all laughing at him.'

'I don't believe Rab is dense at all. He is quite aware of his own comicality. He makes me his confidante sometimes. He once told me, in a lamentable voice, that he wished he did not look so much like a chubby boy. I could hardly keep my countenance. Grace Carfax, a cousin of my husband, had just refused him most indignantly, and Rab's feelings had been wounded. "She need not have spurned me as though I were a

worm and no man," he observed, with tears in his eyes.'

'I can understand Miss Carfax's indignation,' was Elsie's unfeeling observation on this.

'Oh, but I am tender-hearted, and I am sorry for poor little chubby-faced Rab. I will tell you a profound secret, only please do not betray me to my husband or Oliver, or they would circumvent my plan out of sheer malice. I am so sorry for Rab that I am determined to find him a wife, and I think I have someone in my mind who would exactly suit him. There, I will tell you another time, for here come the gentlemen. Elsie, do you mind talking to my husband while I take Oliver away? I have something I want to say to him.' Mrs. Romney's manner changed, and she looked so beseechingly at the girl that Elsie could only assent to this.

It was evident that the Squire had no objection to this arrangement. When Elsie begged him to go on smoking he beamed on her, and observed that Oliver was a lucky fellow; and then he proposed a turn round the lake. Elsie chatted to him happily; she was glad that Oliver's brother was such a big, handsome man; he looked so strong, so genial, so thoroughly the contented Englishman, and he had such a happy faith in himself and his own belongings, no wonder his wife adored him.

He began talking about her presently. Belief in the perfections of his Kitty was evidently part of the Squire's creed; her opinions, her cleverness,

her management of the boy, were all touched on with enthusiasm.

'My mother thinks that there is no one like her,' he observed presently, 'and Oliver agrees with her. By-the-by, what has become of my wife and Oliver? I caught sight of Kitty's gown between the trees a short time ago. It is getting damp, Miss Vaughan. I propose that we go in.'

Elsie agreed to this; her shoes were thin, and the grass was very wet, and the shrubbery paths were dark and damp, and she was growing tired; the Squire's pleasant easy flow of conversation ceased to interest her; she wanted to talk to Oliver; she began to feel it strange that he should desert her on this first evening for Mrs. Romney; she had a hundred questions to ask him. For his sake she had been exerting herself and trying to overcome her natural timidity. She longed for a word of commendation and assurance that he was pleased with her, and he was strolling about with Mrs. Romney and taking no notice of her at all. Elsie began to feel a little hurt and resentful. The Squire unwittingly fanned the flame.

'Upon my word, Miss Vaughan—excuse me, I should have said Elsie—you ought to keep Oliver in better order. He and Kitty will have to give up their moonlight prowls, now he has a young lady to look after; that wife of mine spoils him dreadfully.'

The Squire made this jesting speech without any malice; he secretly delighted in the fact that

his wife and his only brother were such great friends; but Elsie's discontent verged on positive discomfort.

It was too bad. She was just beginning to like Mrs. Romney—at least, not to dislike her—but if she had the bad taste to monopolize Oliver and carry him off for hours on her first evening at the Frythe (a bare hour was the limit of Mrs. Romney's audacity), she should certainly disapprove of her. Why, actually the Squire had got tired of entertaining her, and had gone in quest of his paper and a reading-lamp. Lady Carfax had retired to the east wing; and here she was actually left to herself in a strange house. And Elsie's margin of discontent broke boundaries and overflowed into positive resentment. Elsie was unaware that at that moment two dark forms were ascending the grassy slope that led to the terrace, and that they checked their footsteps involuntarily at the sight of the little white figure sitting so disconsolately under the mellow light of the big standard lamp.

'What a pretty picture, Oliver! Is it not a lovely little face? But she looks dull, poor child! Go in and talk to her while I make myself presentable. What a goose I was to cry! If Romney asks for me, tell him I have gone to see Harry.'

'Ah, what? are those the truants? Upon my word, Kitty, you are a cool hand! I wonder what Miss Vaughan thinks of your monopoly of Oliver?' And the Squire, with his paper in his hand, suddenly blocked up the window.

'Is that not Harry crying?—please excuse me, dear; I will come back directly;' and Mrs. Romney vanished, but not before Elsie's keen girlish eyes had detected that Mrs. Romney's face was flushed and tear-stained and that Oliver's countenance had a grave, abstracted expression.

Elsie was conscious of sudden irritation; her little white throat swelled for a moment, as though something choked her. 'It is very late,' she said hurriedly, 'and I am so tired; may I go to bed, please?'

'Of course you are tired,' returned the Squire kindly. 'Kitty is not often forgetful of her guests' comfort. She ought to have taken you off with her.'

'I will light your candle, Elsie.'

Oliver spoke with unusual abruptness; he opened the door for her somewhat gravely, but as soon as they were alone together in the dimly-lighted hall his manner changed.

'Are you very angry with me, darling?' he said, trying to detain her; but she broke away from him, and walked a little haughtily to the window, and after a moment's hesitation he followed her. 'I see you are offended with me, Elsie,' he said quietly, 'but indeed I could not help myself. Mrs. Romney wanted me to assist her in a little difficulty, but we had no idea that you had been left so long alone. I was quite shocked when I heard the stable clock just now.'

'Don't trouble to apologize to me,' returned

Elsie coldly: 'your brother was very pleasant and entertaining, and I was very well amused.'

But Oliver caught her hands, with sudden irritation. 'For Heaven's sake, don't take that tone with me, Elsie. Don't you see I am worried enough without that?' Oliver spoke with unusual excitement. Elsie had never seen him so moved before. What had she said? How had she hurt him? Were they quarrelling this first evening? She glanced at him a little timidly. 'It is not my fault that you have been left to yourself so long,' he continued, 'and you must not blame Mrs. Romney, either. Do you think I ever wish to leave you?'—his voice breaking into tenderness. 'Elsie, you are all the world to me, but I think you might trust me a little.'

'Trust you! Of course I trust you, Oliver. What can you mean?'

'I hardly know what I do mean, darling. Something has put me out this evening, and I am not quite myself. If you knew how I was longing to talk to you! Elsie, promise me never to be offended with me again for such a little thing.'

Was it such a little thing? Elsie's conscience pricked her. Oliver had always laughed at her little tempers before; he had never taken them seriously. He looked tired and worried, and—well, after all, Elsie's heart was in the right place, and there was healing enough in that shy kiss, the first she had ever offered him, for any wound, however deep.

So the treaty of peace was signed, and though Oliver's gratitude for favours received was somewhat overwhelming, and he would not allow her to leave him, Elsie felt happier than she had done since she arrived at the Frythe, and she was hardly damped when Oliver told her that he would have to leave her for a few hours the next day.

'It is a great bore,' he observed discontentedly, 'for I wanted to take you for a ride; but we will make up for it in the evening.'

'Must the business be done, Oliver?'

'I fear it must, dear, as I am taking the dogcart into Draycott. Mrs. Romney proposes to accompany me, as she has some shopping to do in the town; but I shall ask my mother to drive you somewhere.'

Elsie was just going to say, 'Could I not go in the dogcart too?' but she checked herself, for of course Oliver would take the groom. She was sadly disappointed, however; a ride with Oliver would be so delicious, and a drive with Lady Carfax seemed a very formidable sort of function; but she would not worry him by hinting at this. And she had her reward, for Oliver, who could read her thoughts pretty plainly, was giving her well-deserved praise; she was a dear, unselfish child, and he was ever so much obliged to her for falling in with his plans, and after this he consented to light her candle. Elsie had just taken it from him, and had wished him good-night, when the half-open door of the nursery attracted her notice, and when

Oliver had left her she put down her candle and peeped in.

Mrs. Romney, still in her evening dress, was in her low rocking-chair, by the window. Her boy was lying half asleep on her lap, while she crooned a soft little lullaby over him, and one bare dimpled arm was flung around his mother's neck. As Elsie's footsteps lingered by the door, he joined drowsily in the lullaby.

'Hush, my precious! Harry must go to sleep.' Then, as she saw the girl standing beside her, she continued: 'Is not Harry a naughty boy, to make poor mother take him out of his cot and sing him to sleep?'

'What a darling he is!' returned Elsie, kneeling down beside him. 'How you must love him!' But as she made this very natural speech, Mrs. Romney shivered and sighed.

'I tell Romney that I love him too much. Do you know what it is to love so intensely, Elsie, that the feeling almost amounts to pain? Sometimes, when I think of my two blessings, I am almost afraid of my own happiness. I wonder whether you will ever feel like that with Oliver?'

'I don't know. I fear not.'

'You are so very young, dear,' returned Mrs. Romney gently, and with a sudden impulse she put her arm round the girl, and drew the brown head to her shoulder, 'such a young motherless creature. Thank God that you have got Oliver to take care of you. Never be afraid of trusting him

Elsie; he is so true, so strong, and so brave, that no woman need fear to confide her happiness to his keeping. The more you know him, the more you will love him; with the exception of my Romney, I do not know a man to compare with him.'

'I know he is good,' returned Elsie softly.

Her cheeks glowed at hearing these praises of her lover. She was glad that she had been nice to him this evening.

'Yes, he is good with a man's goodness; that is a very different sort of goodness from ours. We are so weak, even the best of us; we act on impulse and make mistakes.' She checked herself and sighed again. 'Elsie, take my advice—never be afraid of Oliver; tell him everything, everything; you will never have cause to repent your confidence. Now I am going to lay Harry in his cot. He is fast asleep. Does he not look sweet? My bonny, bonny boy! Go to your room, Elsie, and I will come directly and wish you good-night.'

CHAPTER V

IN CHURCH STREET

'Keep cool, and you command everybody.'
ST. JUST.

ELSIE felt strangely happy as she laid her head on the pillow that night. For the first time since her engagement, she was quite sure of her own

feelings: she was beginning to understand Oliver. The remembrance of that little scene of reconciliation in the dimly-lighted hall still thrilled her. Oliver's singular irritability, so foreign to his usual calm languor, his outburst of tenderness, had surprised and touched her. She had never seen him so unlike himself; and yet she had never liked him so well.

As she dressed herself the next morning, she told herself that nothing should make her offended with Oliver again; and she felt a shy, undefinable pleasure at the idea of seeing him. It was slightly disappointing, then, when she entered the breakfast-room, to find only the Squire and his wife at the table.

They both welcomed her very kindly, but the girl's shrewdness at once guessed that some conjugal argument was on the tapis. Mrs. Romney looked a little flushed and anxious, and there was a shade of discontent on the Squire's brow.

'Am I late, Mrs. Romney? I believe I overslept myself.'

A white muscular hand was stretched over Elsie's shoulder as Oliver sauntered into the room; the next moment some fragrant dewy roses lay on her plate, but his greeting was almost a silent one, and then he strolled leisurely to the side-table, and began carving some chicken. Meanwhile, the Squire stirred his coffee and went on with his grievance.

For the first time in their married life, Mrs.

Romney was contumacious; she had just informed him that she had some shopping to do in Draycott, and that Oliver had offered to drive her in the dogcart; and she had actually turned a deaf ear to his hints that the plan had better be given up, as her presence was indispensable to him that morning.

The Squire had some letters to write, and, as his household knew well, the Squire hated letters. His correspondence was invariably of the briefest description; and it was an old joke between husband and wife that even the longest of his love-letters during the period of their engagement had scarcely exceeded the first page.

Mrs. Romney generally acted as her husband's secretary. He found it impossible to arrive at any decision without her; for how was he to be sure what he meant unless Kitty were at his elbow to jog his memory and put things before him in her clear, concise way? But for once Mrs. Romney was obdurate.

'The letters are not of the slightest importance, dear,' she said gently, for, if the truth were known, it was painful for her to refuse him anything. 'Why should anyone waste their time indoors on such a lovely morning? Gran has promised to take Elsie for a drive. They are going across to Thornborough; we have arranged that between us. And you know, Romney, that you meant to ride over to Karslake to give your opinion on Colonel Faucit's new mare.'

This was a decided stroke of policy. The Squire had forgotten all about his promise to Colonel Faucit; he was much obliged to Kitty for reminding him, but he had a notion that one day next week was the time mentioned; but his wife quietly negatived this. No date had been fixed; Romney was to ride over on the first opportunity. There was a fresh argument on this point, carried on by the Squire rather seriously, and opposed by his wife in a half-jesting manner. Oliver remained neutral during the discussion, and ate his breakfast in silence. Once the Squire appealed to him: had not Colonel Faucit suggested the following week? But though Oliver had answered briefly in the affirmative, Mrs. Romney was not convinced.

What did it matter, she observed cheerfully, which day Romney went? Colonel Faucit would be delighted to see him at any time; they had so much in common; they had always so much to say to each other that she never could get in a word. The first fine morning, she was sure the Colonel meant; and had not Romney just informed her that the weather was breaking? Here an indignant disclaimer on the Squire's part; he had prophesied a shower or two—nothing more, he would take his oath of that. But Mrs. Romney only shook her head at him smilingly. She had misunderstood him, she supposed, but, all the same, his correspondence would keep; she had glanced over his letters before breakfast, and not one of them required an immediate answer except Robert

Carpenter's, and they had not made up their minds about that.

'I will think it over and let you know this evening, dear; it is no good deciding in a hurry; Oliver and I will talk it over while we drive into Draycott.'

But here there was another hitch: the Squire was not sure that the dogcart could be used. Rufus had gone a little lame, and he meant to speak to the veterinary surgeon about him. Mrs. Romney seemed rather taken aback at this fresh obstacle; but Oliver came unexpectedly to her aid.

' I suppose I could drive Bob,' he said quietly; and, after a little more argument, it was finally decided that Bob should be put into the dogcart, and that the Squire should lock up his letters and ride over to Karslake. And then Mrs. Romney rose from the table with a look of relief.

"I hope you and my mother will get on all right,' remarked Oliver, as he and Elsie strolled through the conservatory, and he picked her some more roses. 'You will not see my father; he is never visible until luncheon. It is hard lines my having to leave you, but it is no use grumbling, and we will make up for it in the evening. I will take you over to the east wing now and leave you in my mother's charge.' Oliver's quiet decided tone allowed of no appeal, and Elsie reluctantly accompanied him.

They found Lady Carfax writing letters in a

large sunny room with a bay-window looking out over the garden and lake. She received Elsie very graciously, and when Oliver had taken himself off, she brought out some photographs, and bade the girl amuse herself while she finished her letters, as the carriage would not be round for another hour.

Mrs. Romney came in for a moment by-and-by to bid them good-bye. She wore her old gray dust-cloak, and seemed in a great hurry.

'I hope you and Gran will enjoy your drive, Elsie. Luncheon is always a movable feast at the Frythe. Gran is punctual—you are always punctual, aren't you, dear?—but Romney and I have a knack of turning up at odd times. Well, adieu, dear friends. Oliver is waiting for me.' And she nodded and vanished.

'I don't think Catherine seems in her usual spirits,' observed Lady Carfax, as she closed her desk and took up her knitting. 'She is the life of the house generally—Sir Henry calls her his sunbeam—but she has been a little quieter lately. Romney noticed it the other evening. I hope you and Catherine will be great friends.'

'I hope so, too,' returned Elsie demurely.

'That is a pretty gown you have on, my dear,' continued Lady Carfax benignly. 'I wish Catherine would take a little more pains with herself; she has a charming figure, and looks so well when she is properly dressed, but she is dreadfully careless about her appearance. I have asked her

more than once not to wear that old gray dust-cloak, but she always puts me off with a laugh.'

Elsie felt that she agreed with Lady Carfax, but she hardly liked to say so. To her relief, Lady Carfax did not seem to expect an answer. She had good old-fashioned notions on the subject of dress, and her daughter-in-law's disregard of appearances was an old grievance; so she proceeded to air her special views for the benefit of her young auditor:

'No one objects to extravagance more than I do, but we all owe a duty to society. As I often tell Catherine, my eldest son's wife has a position to maintain. I once heard a lady say at the County Ball that Mrs. Romney Carfax was the worst-dressed woman in the room; and yet I had begged and prayed Catherine to get a new dress for the occasion, but she flatly refused to do so.'

'Perhaps Mrs. Romney doesn't care to spend her money on dress.'

'But, my dear, she ought to care, for her husband's sake; but Romney never takes my part in this. In his opinion his wife looks well in anything; he is utterly infatuated about her. He certainly makes her a most handsome allowance; so, as I tell her, her stinginess cannot be justified. Why, she actually told me the other day that she could not afford to buy herself a new cloak! Did you ever hear such nonsense? I often ask Catherine how she spends her money, but I never remember her answering me. She is very soft-

hearted, and I expect she just flings it away on a number of worthless cases. She never can refuse a beggar.'

'I am afraid I am very selfish and spend a great deal on myself,' observed Elsie regretfully.

But Lady Carfax would not allow this. Her future daughter-in-law was an heiress, and great latitude must be permitted her; besides, as she carefully pointed out to Elsie, Oliver was not like Romney; his wife's appearance would be a matter of importance to him; and all this was very pleasant doctrine to Elsie.

After this they prepared for their drive, and by-and-by Elsie found herself chatting quite happily to the formidable Lady Carfax. Lady Carfax seemed anxious to draw her out; she questioned her judiciously about her life at Banksland, and Elsie answered with her usual animation.

Presently Mrs. Romney's name came on the tapis again. Elsie wanted to know if her engagement had been a long one.

'No, dear, it was a very short one. Romney was in a hurry to be married.' And here Lady Carfax hesitated a moment. 'You are one of ourselves, Elsie, and perhaps Oliver has already told you that Catherine was a governess.'

Elsie started; she was rather surprised to hear this.

'Romney met her at the Traffords'; he and Cecil Trafford were great friends, and Romney often stayed at The Firs. I believe he fell in love

with her the first time he saw her. Mrs. Trafford told me that she was never more surprised in her life. Felicia, the eldest daughter, was an exceedingly handsome girl, and it must have seemed strange to her mother that Felicia was passed over and her governess preferred. I don't mind telling you, Elsie, that Sir Henry and I were not at all pleased with our son's choice; though Catherine is now our very dear child, and we would not change her for a dozen Felicias.'

'And you did not see her until she was Mrs. Romney?'

'No. Romney was very firm about that. Romney has a strong will, though he seldom exercises it; but when he once makes up his mind it is very difficult to turn him from his purpose. He refused to subject Catherine to such an ordeal. "You shall see her when she is my wife, mother," he said to me, "but not before;" and he kept his word. It was hard on me, was it not, Elsie? Romney was punishing me because I objected to his marriage.'

'But you liked Mrs. Romney when you saw her,' returned Elsie, who found a strange fascination in the subject.

Lady Carfax smiled as though at some amusing recollection.

'I am afraid I shall shock you; but it is an old joke between Catherine and myself, and she often teases me about it. The first moment I saw her I said to myself, "Can this plain and awkward young woman be my son's choice?" But before

the evening was over I quite loved her. "She is charming, Romney"—those were my words when I bade him good-night. I can see his pleased look now. Do you know, my dear, when little Harry was born Catherine very nearly died. Romney was almost distracted, and I do not think I ever suffered so much in my life. He was quite haggard with misery. The very doctors were sorry for him. I shall never forget those days.' And Lady Carfax shuddered.

'Mrs. Romney somehow fascinates me,' returned Elsie slowly. 'I was rather prejudiced against her at first, but I see I am mistaken now.'

'She certainly endears herself to everyone,' replied Lady Carfax. 'Catherine is so utterly unselfish; she never spares herself if she can give anyone pleasure. It was her long walks with Romney that led to the mischief; she never liked to own to him that she was tired, or to ask him to turn back. It was false tenderness, of course, for in the end she caused him great suffering, and I often tell her that it was absurd weakness on her part. "Suppose you or Harry had died," I once said to her. But she will never be allowed to expose herself to such risks again. Romney is so careful over her. I think she finds his restrictions a little oppressive; Catherine is such an active person, and really her health is superb, but when Romney takes her out now he is always afraid of tiring her. Catherine gets in quite a pet with him sometimes.'

They had reached Thornborough by this time, and Lady Carfax suddenly remembered that she wanted to leave a message with a needle-woman who was doing some plain sewing for her. 'It will not take us much longer to drive back by Draycott,' she observed, 'and it does not matter if we are a little late for luncheon.'

When they reached Draycott, Lady Carfax directed the coachman to drive her to Church Street, and when they arrived she prepared to descend from the carriage. 'I shall not be long,' she observed, 'but I know Mrs. Evans wants me to select the trimming. Catherine would have done it for me, but I quite forgot to remind her. I will try not to keep you long waiting.'

Elsie made an appropriate answer. She assured Lady Carfax she did not in the least mind waiting; then she leaned back listlessly in the carriage and wondered how people could live in such a dull street; the high, narrow houses and their wearisome uniformity oppressed her, and not even the grand tower of Draycott Church at the end of the street could reconcile her to the dulness.

Mrs. Evans's house was made conspicuous by a hanging plant and a canary; a little lower down there was a wire blind and some ugly yellow curtains. How could anyone tolerate a wire blind? thought Elsie; and then she started slightly. At an upper window she had caught a momentary glimpse of a face she recognised. It was only for an instant, but Elsie had unusually keen sight, and

she was sure it was Mrs. Romney. She had come forward to the window and had immediately drawn back. There had been no sign of recognition at the sight of Elsie and the carriage. A moment later the blind was lowered.

Elsie remained staring at the blind until Lady Carfax returned; but when she mentioned the fact of her seeing Mrs. Romney, Mrs. Carfax smiled a little sceptically. 'I think you must be mistaken, my dear. Catherine knows no one in Church Street except Mrs. Evans, and she never employs her. Surely that is Mr. Lockhart, Elsie: no one could mistake him,' as the little man approached with a radiant face. He wore a brown velveteen coat and knickerbockers, and had an enormous Maréchal Niel rose in his buttonhole.

'I saw the Carfax liveries,' he observed blandly, 'and could not resist coming to speak to you. Good-morning, Miss — humph-humph,' with a beaming smile at Elsie, which faded into utter blankness as Lady Carfax ruthlessly dispelled an illusion:

'I thought you were introduced to Miss Vaughan yesterday. My son Oliver, as you know, is engaged to this young lady.'

'I was not aware that I was speaking to Miss Vaughan,' returned Mr. Lockhart ruefully. 'I am very sorry—I mean, I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Vaughan. My friend the Captain is a lucky man. I must congratulate him when I see him.' And here the little man gave

vent to a gusty sigh. 'Well, well, I must not keep you, Lady Carfax. I wonder what attraction you ladies find in Church Street. I met Mrs. Romney here the other evening. Well, give my respects to Sir Henry.' But he remained as though glued to the curb until the carriage was out of sight.

'Is not that the dogcart, Elsie, that I see across the market-place?' asked Lady Carfax suddenly, and Elsie answered in the affirmative. Oliver was driving rapidly out of the town; the groom's seat was empty, and Mrs. Romney was not with him.

CHAPTER VI

BY THE LAKESIDE

'And I will pu' the pink, the emblem o' my dear,
For she's the pink o' womankind, and blooms without a peer.'
BURNS.

LADY CARFAX and Elsie had luncheon together, and then Lady Carfax begged the girl to amuse herself until the others returned, as Sir Henry always expected her to read to him in the afternoon. Elsie was not sorry to be left to her own devices. She went in search of a book, and then strolled down the grassy slope towards the little lake. A certain nook had taken her fancy—a low seat shaded by an acacia. From this seat the house was quite hidden, and only a thick fringe of

shrubbery, with a narrow winding walk through it, skirted the lake, round which she and the Squire had paced the preceding evening.

How still and tranquil it looked this afternoon! The rippling surface of the water was flecked by purple shadows; a small fleet of yellow ducklings sailed aimlessly to and fro, while some foreign ducks plumed themselves on the bank, and two majestic swans floated in stately pride with white arching necks and glossy wings outspread in the sunshine.

Elsie's book lay unopened on her lap. She was not a great reader, and how could she read when blue dragon-flies were skimming across the water, and a sudden splash of a water-rat distracted her attention, when blue-tits and greenfinches darted to and fro among the branches, and the thrush and the blackbird competed like minstrels at a feast?

Elsie fell into a delicious reverie until quick springing steps brought the expectant light to her eyes; and the next moment Oliver was beside her.

'I thought you were never coming back,' she observed reproachfully, as he threw himself at her feet and tossed his straw hat on the grass with the air of a man who feels that he has fairly earned his rest. 'What have you done with Mrs. Romney, Oliver?'

'She and Romney are shut up in the library. My dearly beloved brother is in some fuss about a letter which must catch the afternoon post, so Mrs. Romney refused to own that she had a headache, though she is only fit to lie down and have a nap.'

'I thought your brother was at Karslake?'

'Oh, he went over there, but Colonel Faucit and the mare had gone to Bolton. After all, he was not expected until next week, so he came in late for luncheon, and Mrs. Romney had a pretty severe lecture for sending him off on such a wild-goose chase.'

'Was he angry with her?'

'Angry? Not a bit. Romney is the best-tempered fellow in the world, but he dearly loves a grumble. You may be sure that Mrs. Romney was far more vexed than he. She is writing letters for him as a sort of penance; she furnishes all the ideas, and Romney smokes and fancies that he is hard at work. When they have finished they will go up and have a romp with Harry.'

'Oh, Oliver, I want to tell you something. I saw Mrs. Romney at some window in Church Street, and, though she must have seen the carriage, she did not take the slightest notice of me.'

'In Church Street? Are you sure?' asked Oliver, in a matter-of-fact tone.

'Quite sure. I saw her distinctly. She had her gray cloak on, and her big Spanish-looking hat. No one wears that sort of hat now; so of course I noticed it.'

'Did my mother see her too?'

'No; and she only laughed at me when I mentioned the fact. She says Mrs. Romney knows no one in Church Street.'

'Oh, I would not be too sure of that,' returned

Oliver indifferently, as though the subject did not interest him. 'Mrs. Romney has a large circle of acquaintance, but they do not all belong to the upper classes. They include all sorts and conditions of men. She is very philanthropic in her views.'

'Do you know, Lady Carfax told me something about Mrs. Romney that surprised me very much. I had no idea that she had been a governess.'

'I wonder why my mother chose to impart that unnecessary piece of information,' returned Oliver, rather dryly. 'She is perfectly devoted to Mrs. Romney, and so is my father, but they never can forget this fact. I have always respected Romney, because he is so free from prejudice. I remember when he told me about his engagement that his words to me were, "Whatever the home people say, remember I am marrying a thorough gentlewoman. Catherine's poverty has nothing to do with herself. Her father is a gentleman who has known better days. She has had a hard life, poor girl! and yet she has such a happy nature."'

'Your brother met her at a friend's house?'

'Yes. I will tell you all about it,' returned Oliver, who was secretly amused at Elsie's interest in his brother's love-affairs; all women were romantic, he thought. 'There was a family dinner-party at the Traffords', and he sat by her. He knew, of course, that she was the governess. A deaf spinster aunt sat at his right hand, so he was glad to talk to Catherine. Her conversation interested him; he

thought her so frank and unconscious in manner, but he lost his heart to her a few hours later when he heard her singing little Phœbe to sleep in the dark schoolroom. Phœbe—poor little soul! she is dead now—was a sad invalid, and at times suffered a good deal. Romney told me that he was just running upstairs to fetch something he had left in his room, and as he walked down the passage he heard a clear sweet voice singing Keble's Evening Hymn. The pure liquid notes arrested him, and after a moment he advanced towards the half-opened door of the schoolroom. Catherine was standing by the window with the child in her arms. He could see her face distinctly in the moonlight; she was singing with her whole soul, and in his eyes she looked like some radiant young St. Cecilia. As Romney crept from the door, he said to himself, in an awed voice, "That girl shall be my wife"; and before two months were over they were engaged.'

'I am so glad you have told me this, Oliver. It is almost as interesting as a novel.'

'What a romantic child! I wish Romney could hear you. But Catherine's happiness was rather chequered at first. The Traffords were not pleased with the engagement, and they have been very cold to Romney ever since. They wanted him to fall in love with Felicia, the eldest daughter, a very handsome girl, and Mrs. Trafford accused Catherine of designing underhand ways. The poor girl had rather a life of it. It was all pique and

jealousy on their part; but Romney settled matters in an off-hand fashion by marrying Catherine as soon as possible. He would not hear of waiting for an outfit; she could get everything she wanted in Paris. And so he had his way. Now, darling, I think we have talked enough about Mrs. Romney. If you like to put on your hat, I will take you for a walk, unless you would prefer a game of tennis.'

But Elsie voted for the walk. Elsie professed herself delighted with Fordham, and she and Oliver stopped for a few minutes to admire the view. Below them lay a green park-like meadow, with trees and browsing cattle, and in the centre Fordham Church, with its fine tower, and the sunset clouds behind it. Oliver took her in presently to see the church, and Elsie expressed her admiration of the carved oaken screen and beautiful painted windows; and as they sauntered through the carefully-kept churchyard, she observed that, in her opinion, Fordham was an ideal village.

'It is so bright and cleanly,' she continued, 'and then the church is so beautiful. I think Mrs. Romney is very fortunate to have such pleasant surroundings. She tells me the Vicar and his wife are charming people, and that there is no lack of delightful neighbours.'

'Don't you think we shall be just as fortunate at Dene?' observed Oliver gravely. 'Banksland has one advantage over the Frythe—there is the river.' And then, with pardonable egotism, he began enlarging on his own prospects. There was

some fear that his regiment might be ordered to India. He had been talking to Romney about that last night, and he was very keen about their marrying as soon as possible. 'I could not leave you behind, Elsie,' he continued wistfully.

But Elsie refused to be drawn into any sort of discussion. 'Uncle George would not hear of her marrying yet,' she answered; 'and if Oliver were ordered to India, he must exchange into another regiment—that was all.'

But Oliver shook his head at this. 'Never mind; I will get Mrs. Romney to talk to you,' he returned. 'If I go to India—and go I must before another year is out—I do not intend to leave my wife behind.'

But Elsie turned a deaf ear to this. She wanted Oliver to tell her the name of the little speckled bird on the hawthorn bough; and did he see that rabbit sitting up on end, and stroking its dear little whiskers with its paws? In fact, there was no end to Elsie's inquisitiveness. Oliver smiled at the girl's wilfulness. He could bide his time. Elsie would not let him go alone; he knew that. She might tease him and argue with him, but her heart was safely in his keeping. When the right time came, the young heiress of Banksland would follow her husband as faithfully as the wife of any non-commissioned officer. 'She has plenty of backbone in spite of her skittishness, and she is as sweet as she is sound,' had been the Squire's criticism the previous night. 'Don't leave her

behind you, Oliver. India will do her no harm for a year or two. When you have earned your laurels, and done your duty to your Queen and country, you can take to farming and a country gentleman's life if you like.'

And, as Oliver shared this opinion and was a thorough soldier at heart, no amount of coaxing on Elsie's part would have induced him to remain in England. 'You have promised to be a soldier's wife, my sweet, and you must not tempt me to desert my post,' he said later on when he renewed the subject; and Elsie dropped her pretty little head in silence, for she knew that Oliver was right.

The secret of his influence with her was his unswerving truth, and also his deeply-ingrained sense of duty. Other men prevaricated; they had principles, but they sought to evade them: their words were uncertain, and their standard was the world's standard. Oliver was absolutely true—Mrs. Romney had told her that, and she was beginning to find it out for herself; yes, he was true himself, and he demanded truth in others. She must take care not to disappoint him.

'We will have our ride to-morrow,' he observed, as they turned in at the gate of the Frythe; and Elsie agreed happily to this. Oliver had been charming all the way home; he had dropped the awkward subject of India, and amused Elsie with some of his Aldershot experiences and some humorous stories that his brother officers had told him. Only now and then a word betrayed his

confidence about the future: 'You will like our Colonel, Elsie. He is a splendid fellow, and Mrs. Fullerton is such a nice motherly woman. She will take you under her wing directly. All the young married ladies go to her for advice. She mothers them all.' Or, 'Maxwell is such a useful servant. I find him invaluable; he thinks nothing a trouble. You will find him a handy fellow in packing. Everyone envies me such a treasure. And then he loves Indian life.'

'You must let me go now, Oliver. There is the dressing-bell. Thank you for taking me for such a delightful walk.'

'I will send you up some flowers,' was Oliver's answer, as he turned in the direction of the conservatory. 'Any colour will do, I suppose, as you always wear white in the evening.' Nevertheless, Oliver made his choice slowly and fastidiously. As he gathered some maidenhair fern, Mrs. Romney came into the conservatory; she was still in her walking-dress, and looked pale and weary, and there was a dark shade under her eyes.

'Well, Oliver?' a little abruptly.

'Oh yes, she saw you'—trying to reach a tempting-looking bud over his head. 'Elsie has sharp eyes. It was foolish of you to go to the window. I dare say the servants saw you too.'

'Yes, I caught Martin's eye; not that it matters, but Elsie would chatter to Gran about me. Did she wonder very much, Oliver, at seeing me in such a poky little house?'

'No, she was only curious for a moment; but of course I took it as a matter of course. Rab was in the town, too. I came across him once or twice. You will have to be careful, Catherine.'

'Yes, I know'—sighing—'and by nature I am so incautious. Thank you, Oliver dear, for all you have done for me. I wish I could do something for you in return.'

'You can do something, Catherine'—in rather a peculiar tone. 'Be a brave woman, and tell Romney; nothing would please me so well as that.'

'Ah, no, not now—not until—oh, you know what I mean. There is no need for me to explain. It is cruel of you to say that, Oliver, when you know how it would pain Romney.'

'You are wrong. You are making a grievous mistake.' And Oliver's voice was somewhat stern. 'You are a good woman, Catherine, but on this point you are lamentably wrong. I told you so last night. You are disappointing me terribly.'

'Hush, hush! there is Romney.' And the next moment the Squire made his appearance. He was in evening dress, and it was evident that his object was to select his buttonhole.

'Why, Catherine,' with a surprised glance at her dress, 'you will be late for dinner! Why on earth are you wasting your time chattering with Oliver? I never saw such a woman for talking in my life!'

'I will be ready in a moment, dear.' And she

brushed quickly past him. And as Oliver muttered something about being late too, the Squire found himself alone.

'I wonder what has come to Kitty,' he mused. 'She is not half as bright as usual, and she always seems in a hurry. Her head used not to ache as it does now. I think I will ask Fergusson to have a look at her; only Kitty does so hate fuss and doctoring, and she always says there is nothing the matter with her; but she looked uncommonly queer just now,' grumbled the Squire, as he adjusted the flower in his coat.

CHAPTER VII

A HEATED ARGUMENT

'Then he will talk—great gods, how he will talk!'
NATHANIEL LEE.

DURING dinner the shower that had been foretold by the Squire pattered lightly against the window-panes, and Elsie observed, in a tone of regret, that they would have to spend the evening indoors.

'Catherine will have to sing to us,' suggested Lady Carfax. 'My daughter-in-law is an accomplished musician,' she continued, addressing Elsie; 'she has a very sweet, well-trained voice, that gives us all a great deal of pleasure.'

'You must not praise me too highly, Gran, or

Elsie will be disappointed,' returned Mrs. Romney, smiling. 'I know you sing, too,' turning to the girl. 'My husband is very fond of music, and Oliver also, so our efforts to amuse them will not be thrown away.'

And as soon as they returned to the drawing-room, Elsie was coaxed to the piano. Her voice was sweet, though not powerful, and her performance was warmly praised, and it was with some reluctance that Mrs. Romney consented to take her place. 'I am in no mood for singing to-night,' she observed in a low tone to Oliver, who was lingering by the piano.

'Why don't you make your headache an excuse, then? I can see it is pretty bad,' was his sensible reply; but Mrs. Romney hesitated, and glanced at her husband.

He had seated himself in a large easy-chair by the window, and his whole attitude expressed intense enjoyment. The Squire was passionately fond of music, and his greatest pleasure was to hear his wife sing. In his opinion, Elsie's fresh young voice was nothing in comparison; when Catherine sang, her whole soul seemed wrapped in her song, and as her clear, penetrating voice reached his ears, the Squire's thoughts would travel back to a certain scene that persistently haunted him—a girl with the face of a St. Cecilia singing to a sick child in the moonlight; how distinctly he could recall that scene, and the sudden strange beating of his heart, as he looked at the graceful

figure, and the coils of dark hair against the white neck, and vowed to himself that she, and she only, should be his wife!

'I must not disappoint him,' she whispered; and, as usual, she sang for him, and him alone. What did it matter to Catherine if the room were crowded with admiring auditors? To her there was only one listener, the big, fair-haired man at the other end of the room. She knew well how those honest blue-gray eyes would glisten as she sang 'Auld Robin Gray' or 'Home they brought her Warrior Dead.' Indeed, she knew how to play on every sensitive chord in her husband's heart. Sometimes when she sang some stirring ballad or wild warlike strain, Romney would start up from his chair and pace up and down the room, with his head erect and his eyes shining with enthusiasm.

'Bravo, Kitty! that was splendid,' he would say, with a long-drawn sigh of excitement. 'That makes me feel as though I want to fight. By Jove, if I had a Zulu or two here!' and the Squire's clenched fist was suggestive; but his pugnacity died a natural death, and he grew restful and quiet, as some solemn strain of Handel's floated across the room—'He shall feed His flock,' Catherine sang that grandly, or 'Let the bright Seraphim,' the radiant St. Cecilia look always came into her face then. At such moments Romney almost worshipped his wife.

Elsie listened delightedly as Mrs. Romney sang that evening; she told Oliver afterwards that she

had never heard a more beautiful voice; but the Squire moved a little restlessly in his chair; something was amiss with Catherine's songs to-night: they sounded tame and spiritless, as though the singer's thoughts were far away; once her voice quavered and broke, and she recovered herself with an effort. By-and-by she stopped abruptly. 'I cannot sing more to-night, dear,' she said apologetically. 'I feel stupid and tired.' Then the Squire was on the alert in a moment. What had tired her? Anyone could see she was not herself. He insisted on knowing what ailed her, in rather an authoritative voice. A little headache? was she sure there was nothing more? certain? positive? why had she taken the trouble to sing to them? she was a silly woman, and he desired that she would sit perfectly quiet until bedtime; he would put a shade on the lamp if the light were too strong for her eyes.

Mrs. Romney accepted the shade with gratitude and took up her knitting; she was sorry to be so stupid, but headaches were stupid things; she begged everyone else to be as lively as possible. What was Gran reading? was it an amusing story? and at this question Lady Carfax laid down her book and pince-nez with a dissatisfied air. With regard to novels, she was a severe critic; in her opinion, her humble opinion, the novels of the present day were remarkably deficient in originality and power—their incidents were far-fetched and impossible; and as Lady Carfax was an inveterate

reader, it must be owned that she had a tolerable acquaintance with most of the leading novels. Nothing pleased her better than to point out the defects and weak passages of the last-read work of fiction; and it was just possible that Mrs. Romney knew this, when she so innocently asked if Gran's story were amusing.

'I suppose most people would call it amusing, my dear,' she returned guardedly. 'The descriptions are good as a whole, and it is not badly written'—this was probably the fact, as the book had been written by one of the first novelists of the day—'but I should never have thought that it had been written by a man.'

'Why not, mother?' this question being put rather lazily by the Squire; he was sitting on the couch beside his wife in a regular Darby-and-Joan fashion. Lady Carfax's views on literature always amused her sons.

'Because his hero, the young doctor, is so absurdly quixotic. He actually hesitates for a long time before he proposes to the girl, because she happens to be rich. Most men would think money an advantage to a woman.'

'Not in my opinion,' returned Romney, looking at his wife with a smile, and totally ignoring the fact that his brother was engaged to an heiress; but Oliver was equal to the occasion.

'Hamerton would agree with you, old fellow. Don't you recollect that telling passage—I read it out to you and Mrs. Romney, because I thought

it so good—"Marriage is a lifelong conversation, and I have never found that conversation with any lady was more interesting because she had money in her purse."'

'Capital!' chuckled the Squire. 'Marriage is a lifelong conversation, eh, Kitty?'

'Hamerton said something equally good,' went on Oliver quietly. '"To marry a woman of whom you know nothing is to entrust your children to a woman of whom you know as little.'

'Well, that is true, too,' observed the Squire, but Mrs. Romney interrupted them rather wickedly:

> '"A man may spare,"'

she chanted,

> '"And still be bare,
> If his wife be nowt, if his wife be nowt;
> But a man may spend,
> And have money to lend,
> If his wife be owt, if his wife be owt."'

'Hear, hear!' observed the Squire, delighted with the aptness of the quotation; but Lady Carfax, who was deficient in humour, treated this interruption with quiet disdain; her head was still full of her novel.

'A well-told story ought to be true to life,' she continued sententiously. 'There is false sentiment, I should say—almost a diseased sentiment—in the doctor's character.'

'Bother the doctor!' muttered Oliver, and Elsie laughed at his bored expression; but Romney in-

quired amiably if the doctor and the heiress had hit it off at last.

'They are married, if you mean that; but the misunderstandings have begun in the second volume. The wife has some secret entrusted to her, which she is unable to tell him, and he has found it out, and in consequence they are on the eve of a separation. The poor girl is not a bit to blame, and it is mere persecution on his part. The fact is, he demands impossibilities. Just listen to this passage, Catherine: "When I married you, I understood that I was to share your life; that we were to be really and truly united for time and eternity—that is the essence and meaning of marriage. But now you have shut me out from your confidence, there is a part of your life from which I am excluded. As your husband, I have a right to demand thorough confidence; your very thoughts are mine."'

'The fellow is a prig,' murmured Oliver. 'Don't be afraid, Elsie; I shall never demand your confidence in that high-flown and despotic manner.'

'I don't agree with you,' returned his brother. 'I take the doctor's part.' And the Squire got up from his seat and took possession of the rug, a sure sign that he was disposed for an argument. 'It is a foregone conclusion with all sensible people that absolute confidence is imperative between a man and his wife, and I know Catherine holds the same views.'

'There are exceptions to every rule,' she re-

turned, in rather a low voice. 'I have read the book, Romney. It is a painful story, but I took the wife's part throughout; if she deceived her husband, it was for his own good, and she suffered most bitterly.'

'Stuff! nonsense!' retorted the Squire, thoroughly annoyed at this. 'As though any woman could treat her husband as though he were a child! "Deceived him for his good"! I wonder at you, Catherine, for going over to the enemy in this fashion. But you are only contradicting me for the sake of argument. In my opinion,' still more obstinately, 'no circumstances could justify any wife in keeping a secret from her husband; it is absolute disloyalty; she is acting a daily lie, and——'

'Oh, no, Romney!' and Catherine dropped her work, and spoke in an agitated voice. 'Please do not say such dreadful things! But of course you do not mean them. A wife may be loyal to her husband in every thought and fibre of her being, and yet she may be so unhappily placed—there may be conflicting duties, troubles—that she must keep to herself. Oh, Oliver,' almost passionately, 'why do you not take my part? But you are men, and you do not understand.'

'Why, Catherine,' and the Squire regarded her with surprise, 'how pale you look, and there are actually tears in your eyes! You foolish child, to agitate yourself so over a mere argument.'

'Because I feel it so deeply, and you are all against me, except Gran—even Oliver.'

'Yes, even Oliver.' And Captain Carfax looked at her rather meaningly.

'Of course I know that, and it seems so hard, it almost crushes me. Romney, it makes me unhappy even to differ from you in an argument. I want your opinions to be mine; I never willingly disagree with you, but there may be circumstances——'.

But it was not easy to silence the Squire; he was singularly tenacious in an argument; Catherine's persistence did not please him.

'Now, look here, Catherine,' he said authoritatively: 'if novel-reading is going to infuse those pernicious ideas into your head, the less you read them the better. They would not do me any harm; I should hold my own views all the same, and no amount of brilliant meretricious arguments would influence me. But I will read the book and judge for myself. But I tell you this: you and my mother are both wrong; if I had been that doctor fellow, I should never have had confidence in that woman again. "You have deceived me once for my good, and perhaps next time you will deceive me for your own"—I should say that to her; "and as I value truth before everything, perhaps we had better——" Why, Catherine, my darling, what ails you?' for Mrs. Romney's face was buried in her hands, and she was shivering visibly, but at his touch she started up almost wildly.

'You are cruel, all of you! you have no right to talk so! Let me go, Romney; all this stupid

talk has made my head worse.' But, though she laughed in a forced manner, her face was very pale. 'No, don't come with me'—as her husband followed her. 'Go back, Romney dear; I would rather be alone.'

The Squire returned to the hearth-rug in a crestfallen manner.

'What has come over Catherine? I never saw her like this before. I am sure she must be ill. Mother, don't you think I had better send for Fergusson?' but Lady Carfax shook her head.

'She has a bad headache, and our discussion has excited her. Catherine has very deep feelings; once before she was a little hysterical—don't you remember, Romney, when that Ferard affair happened? The poor woman was wholly to blame, and no one in their senses would have dreamt of taking her part; but Catherine made herself perfectly miserable about her. You were quite angry with her then.'

'Yes, I remember; but that was a very different matter, mother. I could understand Catherine being upset then, but to be hysterical over a novel! Well, I shall go and have a smoke.' And there was a cloud on the Squire's brow as he bade the ladies good-night and went off to his den.

'Shall I go up to Catherine, Oliver?' asked Lady Carfax, a little anxiously.

'I think you had better leave her alone,' was his cautious reply. 'This is a stupid ending to

the evening, Elsie,' he continued, as he lighted her candle. 'Mrs. Romney seldom gives way like this; she is overtired, and has had a worrying day. I tell her sometimes that she cultivates the emotional side of her nature too much; she wants more ballast.'

Oliver's speech was a little too bracing for Elsie; she felt vaguely sorry for Mrs. Romney. It was unkind to go off to her own room and not bid her good-night. She hesitated for a moment as she passed the door, and then she took courage and knocked.

A faint 'Come in' gave her permission to enter. The room was large and full of shadows; but she could dimly discern a dark figure standing by the window. 'I could not go to bed without wishing you good-night,' observed the girl apologetically. 'Is your head very bad, Mrs. Romney? Can I do anything for you? Oh dear!' as a low sob reached her ear, 'you are fretting about something. That is so wrong; it will make your head worse.'

'No, it will relieve me. I do not often cry; my husband hates me to shed a tear. Where is Romney? Was he vexed with me? I have never been so silly before; but—but—I felt as though my heart would break when he said that' —leaning her head against Elsie as she stood beside her in the darkness. Mrs. Romney had sunk into a chair as she spoke, as though her strength had failed her.

'Dear Mrs. Romney, you will make yourself

quite ill,' observed the girl anxiously. 'Why, your hands are like ice! Would you like me to go to Mr. Carfax? He is in the smoking-room with Oliver. Perhaps if you talked to him it would do you good.'

'Nothing would do me good to-night, and I would not have my husband see me like this for the world; it would trouble him so, and he would give me no peace—a night's sleep, that is what I want. Oh, Elsie, when you marry Oliver, never keep anything from him, however small and foolish it may be; men are not like us, they have such hard fixed rules; they do not make allowances. Truth—they will have that at any cost.'

'I shall like to tell Oliver everything,' returned Elsie simply. 'I could not hide anything if I tried.'

'We are alike in that, Elsie dear. I love truth as dearly as you do. I am a bad actress, whatever Oliver may say. I have always been so frank and outspoken, and I loathe any form of deceit; one's husband is one's self. Oh, you will understand it some day; one does not easily lie to one's self.'

'No, of course not.' But Elsie was a little bewildered. If Mrs. Romney had anything on her mind, why did she not tell her husband? But had she anything on her mind? Last night she had seemed so bright and radiant, so full of overflowing spirits.

'Do not talk any more to me to-night, Elsie,'

was Mrs. Romney's next speech. 'In some moods I am better alone. My husband will be coming up directly, and I want him to think I am asleep. I must just go and kiss Harry, and then I will go to bed. Don't trouble about me any more, dear child; I shall be all right to-morrow.' And Elsie felt herself dismissed.

CHAPTER VIII

A MATCH-MAKER

'Jog on, jog on the footpath way,
And merrily hent the stile-a;
A merry heart goes all the way,
Your sad tires in a mile-a.'
Winter's Tale.

WHEN Elsie went downstairs the next morning she found the family gathered round the breakfast-table. Mrs. Romney greeted her with an affectionate smile; she looked pale and jaded, as though she had passed an unrefreshing night, but she spoke with her usual animation. The Squire had evidently slept off his dissatisfaction, and was in capital spirits; to Elsie's intense surprise, he alluded jestingly to the last night's argument.

'Catherine has recovered her temper, you see. We need not be afraid of saying anything to her this morning. We have had it out, and she has promised to be a better woman for the future, and

to allow her husband to have the last word. No more contradiction, eh, Mrs. Kitty?'

'Were you speaking to me, love?' and Mrs. Romney's tone was very gentle. 'I was wondering just then what was the matter with the urn; will you help me with it, Romney?' and the Squire rose with the utmost alertness. A domestic emergency always pleased him; he liked to lecture and find fault and dominate over his womankind in a peremptory good-natured way. Kitty was reproved and set on one side and admonished as though she were an infant. Another time she would have laughed in his face and told him that he was a goose, and knew nothing about urns; but this morning she listened to him meekly, and as he stooped over her, Elsie saw her rest her cheek against his coat-sleeve for a moment, and a great sadness came into her beautiful eyes.

'Elsie and I are going to ride over to Crome this morning,' observed Oliver, when the Squire had returned to his seat. 'What are you good people going to do with yourselves?'

'Catherine and I are going to drive to Repton,' returned his brother. 'A drive will do her good, for she looks uncommonly seedy. We shall come back by Draycott, and I shall look in at the club and read the papers while Catherine does her chores; she seems uncommonly fond of shopping just now,' finished the Squire mischievously; and a deep flush rose to his wife's face.

'You proposed the club yourself, dear. My

business can very well wait.' But the Squire received this remark with good-natured derision, and for the remainder of the meal he seemed bent on teasing his wife and putting her out of countenance.

Elsie enjoyed her ride through the long deep lanes, fragrant with honeysuckle and sweetbrier roses. The steep shady banks were lined with hart's-tongue fern, and beyond the wide stretch of meadow-lands rose the dark purple range of hills, casting their shadows over the whole country. They rode slowly with slackened reins under the dark, arching trees; the still beauty of the summer morning, with its freshness and perfume and exuberance of young quivering life, seemed to fill Elsie's nerves with quicksilver, and Oliver's mood was almost as joyous as hers.

'If we could always be young,' sighed Elsie, 'and it were always summer. I do so hate getting old, Oliver! Can you fancy me with wrinkles and gray hairs like old Mrs. Spiller at the Lodge?'

'We shall grow old together, darling, that is one blessing,' returned her companion, with an admiring glance at the slight trim figure beside him. Elsie's fair hair was dishevelled, her eyes were bright with youth and happiness. Would those pink cheeks ever grow pallid and lined? Would there be crow's feet under the smiling eyes? Perpetual youth and summer, that was what Elsie wished. She would have had flowers grow all the year round in that improbable country of her dreams.

Oliver smiled a little gravely over the girl's quaint conceit. He had a notion that life meant something better than unclouded sunshine. Youth at its best was immaturity; the growing instinct that is in all healthy human nature could not be restrained in this fashion. The many-sided aspects of life, its working days and stormy nights, its autumns and winters and brief, changeable springs, were more alluring to Oliver than Elsie's perpetual summer.

'I am not afraid of growing old,' continued Oliver thoughtfully, 'but I must have my life first. When I have fought a few battles, and done something for my country, I will not refuse to lie still on my oars. Nothing lasts in this world. Even our ride, perfect as it has been, must come to an end'—as they turned in at the gates.

Mrs. Romney was watching for them at the hall door. She ran down the steps to pet the horses.

'Romney is on the tennis-ground marking out the courts,' she said, as she produced some lumps of sugar from her pocket. Jess was already rubbing her arm with soft, dainty lips, as though asking for the delicacy. Oliver, who was detaching Elsie's small foot from the stirrup, lifted her down, and then turned to his sister-in-law:

'Surely you have not been to Repton and back in this time?'

'Oh no; Romney changed his mind, and, after all, we only drove in to Draycott. He had to go to the bank and to one or two places, and neither

of us cared for a longer drive. Elsie dear, do not trouble to change your habit before luncheon. It is just ready. We have some people coming this afternoon to tennis, and you can make yourself smart by three o'clock.'

'Catherine did not want to go to Repton,' observed Mr. Carfax as he took his seat, 'so I just overhauled the papers at the club while she did her errands. I saw you ordering groceries, Kitty, as Rab and I passed Williams'. Who was that young lady to whom you were talking so earnestly?'

'Young lady!' returned his wife rather hurriedly. 'Whom could you mean, Romney?'

'Oh, Rab saw you first; he is a regular ferret, and puts his nose into everything. "There's your wife, Squire," he said, "and she is talking to an overgrown child in pink cotton. Let us go in and speak to her." But I was in a hurry, so I could not wait. Who was your friend, Kitty?'

'Romney, do you mind telling me what figure you gave for Jess?' asked Oliver abruptly. 'She carried Elsie splendidly this morning. Excuse me for interrupting you, Mrs. Romney, but I am writing to Malings by this afternoon's post, and he is going to look out for a likely mare. Romney is a good judge of horseflesh, and I want to put Malings up to a trick or two.'

'Jess was a regular bargain,' returned the Squire, somewhat flattered by this praise, and the next minute they were in eager discussion.

Mrs. Romney drew a quick breath, and then turned to Elsie. She wanted to know what she intended to wear that afternoon. 'You must make yourself pretty, because the Pollocks are coming, and they are very big people;' but it may be doubted whether she heard the girl's answer. She rose from the table before the gentlemen had finished. 'Come, Gran,' she said imperiously, 'there is no need to wait for them. When Romney talks about horses, he sits half the afternoon.'

But the Squire's voice called her back before they had reached the door. 'What a hurry you are in, Kitty! and I forgot to tell you something: Rab has asked us all to dinner to-morrow, and will take no refusal. I made an excuse for you, mother, that you never leave the pater in the evening, but the rest of us will have to go. How he will seat us all in that room is a problem that Rab must solve; but I am almost suffocated by the prospect beforehand.'

'How absurd Mr. Lockhart is with his invitations!' returned Mrs. Romney, with unusual irritation. 'You might have refused, Romney; you know we would all much rather stay at home.'

'Speak for yourself, Kitty! An evening at The Hut is very good fun, and when you once get into your chair it is not so bad, and, by Jove, he has a capital cook. I respect that woman. Mrs. Brattle has a vocation. The Brattle sauces are not to be despised.'

'Don't talk in that ridiculous way, Romney, or Elsie will think you are a gourmand. He does not really mind what he eats, Elsie; bread and cheese would content him: he puts on these epicurean airs to make you believe he is dainty.'

'I knew that would fetch Kitty,' laughed the Squire. 'She thinks Rab a sensualist because he likes a good dinner and is rather fastidious about his wines: she is a bit of a Puritan in her way, and thinks it shocking waste of money to drink good wine. Well, my dear, I am sorry Rab's impromptu feast does not please you, because I told him that we should be delighted to come. Don't you think it will be great fun?' turning to Elsie; and Elsie could not deny that she thought it would be amusing; she was sure Mr. Lockhart would be a droll host.

'Very well, we will go, then,' returned Mrs. Romney resignedly. 'You must put on your oldest gown, for there is hardly space to turn in Rab's rooms, they are so crowded with curiosities. It is a pretty little house,' she continued, as they went upstairs, 'but Rab has no idea of arrangement; he buys everything that takes his fancy, and Mrs. Brattle has to find room for it. Oh, you recollect that I told you I had a little scheme in my head: there is a poor little governess I know, such a harmless, gentle little creature, who would make an excellent wife for Rab. Wait a moment; I shall have to take Romney into confidence, after all. Romney,' as he came up out of the dining-

room at that instant with his cigarette-case in his hand, 'do you mind if I ask Gussie Poole to-morrow to stay for a day or two? She has not been here for months.'

'Gussie Poole!' in a disgusted tone. 'My dear child, what an idea! Oliver always finds her such an infliction; and he hates people being here during his visits.'

'Gussie will not be in his way; she is always with me or Harry,' returned his wife, in a pleading tone. 'I had such a forlorn little note from her this morning; she has lost her situation—the people are going abroad—and she is so miserable with that stepmother of hers. She lives in Draycott, Elsie, and we could drive over in the wagonette to-morrow and fetch her.'

'But why to-morrow? You know we are going to dine at The Hut. If you must have her, she could come the next day.'

'Oh, I shall take her to The Hut; you know Rab always expects us to bring our guests;' and now Mrs. Romney's eyes began to glisten with mischief. 'Don't be tiresome, dear, and thwart my little scheme; I have set my heart on taking Gussie.'

Then the Squire burst into a great laugh.

'So that is your little game, Kitty? You silly woman, do you suppose Rab, with all his oddities, will fall in love with that washed-out little creature? Besides, he has seen her.'

'Indeed he has not,' replied Mrs. Romney.

'Gussie has only stayed with us once, and Rab was away; and she is a good little thing, and not really plain, if she had enough to eat and her clothes were not so shabby.'

'Pshaw! Well, do as you like.'

And the Squire turned on his heel. Catherine's protégées were legion, and they were none of them too well dressed; but he secretly chuckled over the idea that Rab, who was a gentleman in spite of his eccentricities, and came of an old family, should cast admiring eyes on a little pale-faced girl like Gussie.

'I am half in joke and half in earnest,' went on Mrs. Romney, as she followed Elsie into her room. 'I have such a fellow-feeling for poor Gussie, she is such a good little soul, such a hard-working, noble little creature, quite a heroine in her small way, and she has one of the typical fairy-tale sort of stepmothers; but,' checking herself, 'I will not trust myself to speak of that woman.'

'And she is a governess?'

'Yes, a daily governess, a poor little half-educated drudge, for she has been earning her own livelihood ever since she was fifteen. The father was a curate at St. Paul's; before he married again they were fairly comfortable; but a large young family drained his resources; he only died three years ago, and since then they have been terribly pinched. It really goes to my heart to see Gussie's shabby frocks. I used to give her a new gown now and then, and you should have seen the poor girl's

gratitude; but this year I have had nothing to spare for Gussie.'

'I have a good idea,' returned Elsie, who was very generous by nature. 'Could I not give her one of my dresses? Holbrook has put in far too many; I shall never want them all, and I should not like Oliver to think me too extravagant, as he notices everything I wear. Shall I show you my dresses, Mrs. Romney? and then you can choose the one you think most suitable, and perhaps your maid could make it fit Miss Poole.'

'You are a darling,' returned Mrs. Romney, overjoyed at this proposition. 'Now I come to think about it, Gussie is just your height, only she is much thinner. You will be a real fairy godmother, Elsie, and my poor Cinderella will be transformed. I should not be surprised if Gussie should look quite pretty, for she has an interesting little face.'

'She must be made to believe that the dress is your present,' returned Elsie earnestly; 'she could not accept a gift from a perfect stranger.' And Mrs. Romney agreed to this.

It was not very easy to make the selection, but at last Mrs. Romney fixed on a dainty white frock trimmed with beautiful embroidery; it was far too good, she observed, but all Elsie's gowns were perfect; but it had one advantage over the others, that it would wash.

'I can spare that blue cotton as well,' returned Elsie magnanimously; 'it is very pretty, and I

bought it in Paris, but I can easily do without it. There is a hat that matches it. Do take it, Mrs. Romney. I can buy a dozen new gowns if I like, and Uncle George will only call me an extravagant puss. I should love Miss Poole to have them.' And, after a great deal of persuasion, Mrs. Romney consented to avail herself of Elsie's generosity.

She mystified Oliver by calling Elsie the fairy godmother all the remainder of the day, though she refused to enlighten him about the origin of the title and teased him unmercifully about Gussie.

A letter was sent by hand to Draycott, and the servant brought back Gussie's reply. Mrs. Romney showed it to Elsie that evening:

'DEAR, DEAR MRS. ROMNEY,' wrote Gussie,

'How good you are! I was quite miserable and hopeless when I woke this morning. I could not see the least little bit of comfort anywhere: things have been getting worse lately, and I have cried myself to sleep every night. When I showed your note to mamma, she made no objection to my coming; I dare say that in her heart she is glad to get rid of me for a day or two: so I will be quite ready for you to-morrow morning.

'Yours most gratefully and lovingly,

'GUSSIE.'

CHAPTER IX

A MODERN CINDERELLA

'Where's the cook? is supper ready, the house trimmed, rushes strewed, cobwebs swept?'—*Taming of the Shrew.*

THE Squire asked Oliver to ride with him the next morning to see a new barn that had just been erected on the farm: so Mrs. Romney and Elsie went alone to Draycott.

Gussie was to be ready for them by twelve o'clock; so, as there was half an hour to spare, Mrs. Romney proposed that they should utilize the time by laying in a stock of stationery that was needed for household use.

Mrs. Romney had almost completed her purchases at the stationer's, and Elsie was amusing herself at the opposite counter by turning over some pictorial papers, when a young girl entered the shop and took up her position beside her.

Elsie was too much engrossed with the *Graphic* to notice her at first, until a remarkably sweet voice reached her ear, when she turned round and regarded her rather curiously. At the same moment Mrs. Romney rose hastily, and, after a few words spoken in a low tone to the man who was serving her, left the shop without taking any notice of Elsie.

The girl was shabbily dressed in a pink cotton that was evidently outgrown, and had been fre-

quently washed. She looked about fourteen, though she was rather tall for that age, and her face was thin and singularly careworn. She had soft, pathetic-looking blue eyes, and a long plait of fair hair fell to her waist. She looked at Elsie in a shy, admiring way—probably she had never seen such a dainty little person before—then she gave her attention to a book she was selecting.

'We have had that already. Will you please show me something else? One of Trollope's or Kingsley's will do;' but at this moment Elsie missed Mrs. Romney.

'Mrs. Carfax is outside,' observed the shopman, noticing her surprise, and Elsie found her inspecting some childish garments in the window of the baby-linen shop.

'Do you think those pinafores pretty?' she asked, as Elsie joined her. 'Would they do for Harry? Do you mind going in and asking the price while I go back for a moment? I have forgotten something. Get Mrs. Julius to show you her stock, and I will be with you in a moment.'

Elsie did as she was bid. The pinafores were very pretty, and she put aside three for Mrs. Romney's inspection; but more than ten minutes elapsed before Mrs. Romney made her appearance. Elsie went to the door once to see if she were coming; to her surprise, she was standing on the pavement talking to the girl in the pink cotton. When she saw Elsie she left off talking, and joined her at once.

'Have I been long?' she said hurriedly. 'I am so sorry to keep you, Elsie, and we shall be late for Gussie. Let me see those pinafores. Yes, they will do very nicely. Please put them up, Mrs. Julius, and we will take them with us.'

'Who was that girl?' asked Elsie, rather inquisitively.

'Oh, she is a young protégée of mine,' returned Mrs. Romney carelessly. 'I have plenty of friends in Draycott,' and her tone somehow made Elsie feel that she had been too curious. The next moment she recollected the Squire's speech about 'the overgrown child in pink cotton.' It must be the same girl that Mr. Lockhart had seen yesterday.

Mrs. Romney was rather quiet until they reached their destination, a small, uninviting house, with an untidy garden. As the wagonette stopped, the door opened, and a rough-looking maid-of-all-work brought out a shabby brown portmanteau. A young lady followed her, whom Mrs. Romney welcomed very kindly.

'Jump in, Gussie, or we shall be late for luncheon. This is my little sister-in-law to be—Elsie Vaughan; she and I are great friends already. Elsie, I have told you all about Gussie, so you need not treat her as a stranger; we must all be as merry as possible.'

'I am very glad to see you, Miss Vaughan,' returned Gussie shyly. What a radiant young princess she looked to Gussie, sitting opposite to

her in her shabby brown gown. But Elsie regarded her very kindly.

Miss Gussie was certainly a plain little person, the youngest, and that old brown frock was hideous; but she had nice eyes and gentle, unassuming manners, and there was something very natural and artless about her. It would not be difficult to get fond of her, she was sure of that.

'I nearly cried with joy when I read your letter,' Gussie was saying. 'Three whole days at the Fythe with you and dear Lady Carlax and Harry! Ah, how happy I shall be!' And a soft colour came into the thin girlish cheeks that had lost their roundness.

'And my husband—you have not forgotten my husband, Gussie?'

'No, indeed,' in Gussie's most impressive voice. 'Mr. Carlax is always so kind to me, but I am rather afraid of him. He is so grand-looking and splendid altogether that I never know what to say to him.' And Mrs. Romney laughed at this.

'Oh, we all know how you admire the Squire, but really, Gussie, you must try and get over your awe of mankind. She is afraid of Oliver, too, Elsie; she is as quiet as a mouse when either of them is in the room, and yet she will chatter to me and Gran for the hour together. We are all going out to dinner to-night, Gussie,' she continued, 'and I shall take you under my wing. I have told you about Mr. Lockhart, what a good little man he is. I don't believe Rab was ever

out of temper in his life, and he does the kindest and most generous actions. He is not handsome, certainly, but he is as good as gold.'

As Mrs. Romney made this laudatory speech, a shade passed over Gussie's face, and a distressed look came into her eyes.

'You are very kind, dear Mrs. Romney,' she stammered, 'and I should dearly love to go with you—it is so long since I have been to a real party—but—but'—and now there were actual tears in the poor girl's eyes—'you had better leave me behind. I should only disgrace you. I have nothing proper to wear.'

'Tut! nonsense!' returned Mrs. Romney vigorously. 'Did you ever hear of Cinderella and the fairy godmother? Just wait a little. I am going to bring out a fresh edition of the dear old tale. I am going to play the part of fairy godmother myself, and you shall be turned into a real princess.' And as Gussie looked at her with puzzled eyes, she patted her on the shoulder, and told her to be patient, like a good girl.

Two hours afterwards, as Elsie was swinging lazily in a hammock under the elm-trees, Gussie came in search of her, to tell her a most wonderful piece of news.

'Oh, Miss Vaughan,' she burst out, and her cheeks were burning with excitement, 'did you ever hear of such kindness!' And thereupon Gussie related to her amused auditor how Mrs. Romney had taken her into her room and shown

her the loveliest and daintiest of gowns that she was to wear to-night, and not only that—and Gussie's eyes looked twice their ordinary size—but there were such a beautiful blue dress and hat, prettier than any that she had ever seen in her life, which Mrs. Romney had told her that she was to wear at the tennis-party the following afternoon, 'and she was quite angry with me when I could not help crying over such kindness,' finished Gussie, little dreaming that the real benefactor was rocking herself to and fro in the hammock before her.

'Little Miss Poole looks dowdier than ever,' observed the Squire, when he joined his wife in the drawing-room. 'Upon my word, Kitty, you are not showing your usual tact and sense. Fancy putting that pale washed-out little creature in her shabby frock beside Elsie Vaughan! I saw Elsie just now, and she looked perfectly charming. Rab, with all his good nature, will never look twice at Miss Poole.'

'Rab is far too much of a gentleman to neglect any of his guests,' returned Mrs. Romney tranquilly. 'So you are ready, Gussie, my dear?' as the door opened, and a slim white figure hesitated on the threshold. Gussie in her humility hardly knew how to comport herself in her new finery.

The Squire checked an exclamation with difficulty; then he coughed slightly and rearranged his buttonhole bouquet. This smooth-haired little girl with smiling eyes, who was dressed so prettily,

could not be Miss Poole! Cinderella transformed into the princess was hardly a more startling transformation than the poor little governess in her shabby brown frock, changed into this well-dressed young lady.

Gussie's blushes were wonderfully becoming; her little white throat swelled with innocent pride; if only her stepmother could have seen her, and Laura and Connie and the boys, they would not have called her Muff then, the sobriquet by which Gussie was known at home.

'Miss Vaughan quite started when she saw me,' whispered Gussie to her friend. 'Dear, dear Mrs. Romney, how happy you have made me! I know I shall enjoy myself this evening.'

'I have taken the liberty of bringing a friend who is staying with me,' observed Mrs. Romney, when Rab met them at the door. 'You have never seen Miss Poole before.' And the little man rubbed his hands and looked excessively pleased.

'The more the merrier, eh, Squire? I am delighted to see you at The Hut, Miss Poole.' And Mr. Lockhart beamed all over, while Gussie blushed very prettily. No one had ever blushed before when Rab made his little speeches, and Rab positively thrilled with satisfaction as Gussie looked at him with gentle plaintive eyes.

'You are very kind,' she faltered, and as Rab ushered them into the drawing-room and went off in search of Mrs. Brattle he felt two inches taller.

'What a beautiful room!' whispered Gussie, as

she followed Mrs. Romney into a recess, while the Squire, who had grown wary by experience, piloted Elsie round corners and between cabinets until he reached a massive oak settle, when he seated himself with a sigh of relief. Elsie glanced round her curiously, but she did not echo Gussie's speech; to her the low, quaintly-shaped room was overcrowded with furniture—Chippendale chairs and tables, carved cabinets loaded perilously with old china, lamps, clocks, pictures on easels, blocking up all available space.

'When I once take my seat,' observed the Squire solemnly, 'I never move, on principle. I broke a valuable china dish last time I was here; and the time before I knocked over an easel. How any man can live in such a heap of furniture passes my comprehension. Ah, there goes the gong, and here is our host. I have got to take you in to dinner, Elsie. You must not take my arm; it would be dangerous; follow me closely, and I will get you safely out of the room.'

The Squire always took the foot of the table on these occasions, and Elsie sat by him. Gussie, as the stranger, found herself placed on the left hand of her host. She was very shy at first, and talked in monosyllables. Rab in his evening attire, with diamond studs, and a flashing ring on his little finger, seemed very grand and formidable in Gussie's eyes, but before dinner was over she was chatting to him in her usual artless way.

Rab was rather curious about his new guest; he

plied her with questions—if she lived in Draycott, why had they not met before? he was positive that he had never seen her; where had she hidden herself all this time? And then Gussie, with many blushes, avowed that she had seen Mr. Lockhart more than once: did he not drive into Draycott in a dogcart with a beautiful bay mare? Oh yes, he had passed her more than once as she went to her teaching; did not Mr. Lockhart know that she was a governess—the daily governess? had not Mrs. Romney told him? And Gussie grew crimson, as though she had been detected in a fault.

Before the evening was out, Rab knew all about Gussie's troubles—the hard, bitter-tempered step-mother, and the mischievous unruly brothers and sisters. 'They call her Muff, and tease her most unmercifully, and she is so good to them. Gussie has the sweetest nature; she is the most heroic little creature,' continued Mrs. Romney, weaving her harmless little web round clumsy, slow-witted Rab. 'You must ask her to sing. No, I have not brought any songs to-night; I have left them to the girls.' But, as Elsie could not be found, Oliver having decoyed her out into the garden, Gussie sang one song after another, in a fresh, sweet little voice that went straight to Rab's heart.

Naughty Arachne got him into her corner again while Elsie and Gussie were putting on their hats.

'We have had a delightful evening. You have been very kind and attentive to poor little Miss

Poole, Rab, and I assure you your kindness will not be thrown away. Gussie thinks everything beautiful; she told me just now that Mr. Lockhart had such taste, and that she was sure he was very clever to have so many books. You may be sure that I did not undeceive her. I dare say she thinks that you have read them all. Gussie is such a dear, simple child, and believes everything. Do you think her pretty, Rab? Of course she is not as pretty as Elsie, but she has a nice little face. If Gussie were only happy, and had the chances of other girls, a good, kind husband to take care of her—— Oh, are you ready, girls? Please don't wait for me. Rab will walk across with me. You may stay with me if you like, Gussie, unless you prefer to go with my husband.' And, as Gussie chose to remain with her friend, the three walked home very happily in the moonlight.

'Well, Gussie, have you enjoyed yourself? Have you had a happy evening? Poor Mr. Lockhart makes a capital host, does he not? But it is very sad to see that pretty little house without a mistress.'

'Why does not Mr. Lockhart marry?' asked Gussie bashfully, and Mrs. Romney returned an evasive answer; not for worlds would she tell the girl that to her knowledge Rab had made fruitless offers to more than five ladies. She questioned Gussie skilfully, and elicited the fact that Rab was not plain in Gussie's eyes. 'He is not handsome,' continued Gussie innocently, 'but I think he is

very pleasant-looking, and he has so much expression.' And Mrs. Romney retailed this speech to the much-flattered Rab; evidently prominent light-blue eyes were quite to Gussie's taste, and hence it was a foregone conclusion in Mrs. Romney's opinion.

CHAPTER X

ELSIE'S POSY

'When the sea is calm, all boats alike
Show mastership in floating.'
Coriolanus.

THERE was a large garden-party at the Frythe the next afternoon. It was given in Elsie's honour, and people came from a distance to inspect the young heiress; in his friends' opinion, Captain Carfax had done remarkably well for himself, and he was making a far better match than his brother had done. Mrs. Romney was a charming woman, but no one knew anything about her people; gossip reported that she had been a governess, and that her poverty had been so great that even her wedding outfit had been paid for by the Squire.

Happily unconscious of these remarks, Mrs. Romney received her guests with her usual large-hearted hospitality. The Squire, who was very sociable by nature, dearly loved to gather his friends and neighbours round him on every possible occasion, and it was his wife's delight to carry out his wishes. She was an excellent manager, and

the dinners and other entertainments at the Frythe were always admirably arranged. Mrs. Romney was an ideal hostess; she was so full of life and spirits, so anxious that her guests should enjoy themselves and feel at home, that no one could feel neglected or out in the cold.

The Squire was a genial host, but he was not equal to his wife; he preferred to talk to his special cronies, or to get into snug corners with a favourite guest and admire his wife's graceful figure as she flitted from one group to another. 'Look at her,' he said once to his mother; 'she finds something to say to everyone. She is not even bored by that deaf old Lady Martin. Catherine is so human; she declares she likes everybody, and, upon my word, I believe she does—Jews, Turks, Infidels, she would have a kind speech for them all. I call her my Lady Bountiful sometimes, and the name just fits her. Well, Kitty,' catching hold of her, as she was about to pass him with a smile, 'what are you after now? You will wear yourself out, trying to be in a dozen places at once.'

'Please do not keep me, dear,' with an anxious glance at a knot of people in the centre of the lawn; 'we are going to get up a game of croquet for the elderly people—married *versus* single—and I am looking all over the place for old Miss Davison. Have you seen her, Romney?' enforcing her question with an impatient little shake of his arm. 'What are you looking at?'—petulantly, as he regarded her with tender amusement. 'Some-

thing is wrong with my dress; I have torn some lace, I suppose?'

'There is nothing the matter with your dress, my Lady Bountiful,' returned the Squire. 'Don't ask me to go after old Miss Davison—I detest her. She was in the tea-tent five minutes ago. There, she is off! Did you ever see such a piece of quicksilver, mother? Now she has gone to say pretty things to that spiteful old woman, and I have reason to know,' dropping his voice and looking cautiously round him, 'that she is the little bird who makes all those nasty remarks about Catherine. It is a fine gathering! Most of our friends are here,' he remarked complacently, as he and Elsie walked down the lawn later on, after a most exciting set of tennis. Oliver and a certain Miss Waldegrave had been their opponents, and the Squire and Elsie had won. 'Catherine said we had better have a large affair while we were about it, and she was right, as usual. We got the band over from Draycott—a good band always fetches people—and I should not be surprised if the young people begin dancing presently. Is it not an animated scene—all those gay dresses, and the tents, and the beds of flowers?'

'It is very pretty,' returned Elsie dreamily. 'Look at that boatful of children on the lake, and the swans gliding in their wake, and those dear little things dancing under the trees. Everyone looks so happy. Ah! there is little Miss Poole sitting under the acacia with Mr. Lockhart.'

'By Jove, yes! and they have been playing three sets. Upon my word, Rab is going it!'

'Miss Poole is not a good player,' returned Elsie demurely; 'but Mr. Lockhart does not seem to mind. I heard him comforting her just now; he was telling her that she only wanted practice and assurance. It was so amusing to hear him; and Miss Poole was so humble and grateful.'

'Elsie, we want you to make up another set,' observed Oliver, who now joined them. But Elsie demurred. She was tired; she had been playing most of the afternoon; Oliver must find another partner; she would sit down in the shade and rest herself. No, the Squire need not stay with her; she did not mind being alone.

'I don't care about playing myself,' was Oliver's reply. 'Suppose you take my place, Romney. I will just hunt up Miss Waldegrave—she was sitting in the veranda—and then I will come back to you, Elsie.' But Elsie pretended not to hear this, and when they were out of sight she got up and strolled down a secluded shrubbery path that led to the gate. She was tired and overexcited, and longed for a few minutes' solitude. Oliver would soon find her. She was weary of listening to pretty speeches, of feeling herself the cynosure of all eyes. It was delicious to find herself alone with the birds who were twittering round her; the music sounded better when it was softened by the distance. And here Elsie's musings were suddenly

checked. She had heard no footstep, not even the rustle of a dress, but a turn in the shrubbery brought her face to face with a young girl. Elsie's startled exclamation was faintly re-echoed, and the girl pressed nervously against the hedge. She stammered a sort of frightened apology to Elsie.

'The gate was open, and I walked up the path a little way to listen to the music. It sounded so beautiful, and no one stopped me. I meant no harm.'

'You are not one of the guests, then? No, of course not,' with a glance at the shabby pink cotton. Elsie's quick eyes had recognised her at once. It was the same young girl who had been choosing books at the library. There was no mistaking the thin, anxious face and the large, wistful blue eyes. She was Mrs. Romney's protégée. 'You are doing no harm at all,' she went on, with sudden animation. 'If you come with me a little farther up this path, you will have a view of the house and lawn. No one will see you'—as the girl shrunk back in manifest alarm—'and it is such a pretty sight. The children are dancing under the trees, and the lawn is covered with people. You can just peep through the bushes and see it all.'

'Are you sure no one will see me?' returned the girl anxiously; and Elsie again noticed the sweetness of her voice. 'I do want to see it all dreadfully—the lake and the house—but I am afraid that I am doing wrong.'

'What nonsense!' returned Elsie, with peremptory good-nature. 'Come with me. I am staying in the house, so no one will question us. The view is only a few yards farther. There is a break in the bushes, and you can see everything.' And the girl allowed herself to be persuaded. She followed Elsie closely, almost holding her breath, as she stole after her with noiseless footsteps. When they had gained their hiding-place, she stood beside her as though she were riveted to the spot.

'How beautiful!' she murmured presently. 'It is far more beautiful than I thought. That lovely lake, and the trees dipping their branches into the water, and the long veranda with all those climbing roses, and all those windows shining like gold. What a great house! And then all those fine people so grandly dressed! It is like a picture.'

'I knew you would be pleased,' returned Elsie in a friendly voice. 'The Frythe is a very nice old-fashioned house, but I do not call it grand.'

'It seems so to me; but perhaps you are used to fine houses.' And here the girl looked at her shyly. This beautifully-dressed young lady was very kind to her; but Elsie only laughed, and played with the flowers in her hand. She carried a posy of loosely-tied roses that Oliver had given her, and that harmonized with her dress.

'You are pulling that lovely rose to pieces!' exclaimed the girl in a distressed tone. 'I am so fond of flowers, and——'

'Eva, what on earth are you doing here?' asked

a reproachful voice beside them, and both girls started violently. Mrs. Romney was standing in the path with a perturbed look in her eyes; the girl turned perceptibly paler.

'I only walked a little way up the path to listen to the music,' she faltered. 'I am very sorry. I meant no harm.'

'You must not be angry with her,' interposed Elsie, for she thought Mrs. Romney's manner was unnecessarily stern, and the poor child looked terribly frightened. 'She was only just inside the gate, and I brought her here to have a peep at the gay scene. She has done no harm at all.' But Mrs. Romney's displeasure was not lessened.

'You promised me never to come near the place, Eva,' was her severe answer. 'You have broken your word. How can I trust you again?' But here the poor girl burst into tears.

'I only wanted to see it once; I——'

'Never mind,' returned Mrs. Romney hastily; 'you must go now, and I will talk to you another time.' And she put her hand on her arm to enforce her words, but Elsie pushed by her.

'There, you shall have my flowers. Please do not cry; you have done nothing wrong. Mrs. Romney has no right to be so hard with you.'

'Go away, Elsie, and leave me to manage my own business.' But Mrs. Romney's good humour had returned. 'Come, Eva, I will walk with you to the gate. Quick, or I shall be missed.'

Elsie hesitated for a moment, and then she

followed them more slowly. 'I may as well wait for Mrs. Romney,' she said to herself; but before she had gone many yards she changed her mind. Mrs. Romney might be vexed with her; she might consider herself watched.

She was about to retrace her steps, when she saw Mrs. Romney stop and put her arms round the girl. 'Don't do it again,' she heard her say. 'No, I am not really angry with you; it was thoughtless, but I forgive you;' and as she spoke Elsie saw her pass a caressing hand down the fair plait of hair. Elsie turned away quickly, and the next minute she met Oliver.

'So I have caught my bird at last,' he said, drawing her hand through his arm. 'You wanted to escape me, or you would never have taken refuge in these damp shrubberies: no one ever walks in them. Now, I am going to punish you for daring to play me such a trick. Why,' with a sudden change of tone, 'you have dropped your roses, Elsie. I will go back and look for them.' But Elsie stopped him.

'Oh, I am so sorry! I ought not to have done it. I have given away your flowers, Oliver.' And then Oliver did look a little surprised.

'I did not want to part with them, and they were so lovely,' continued Elsie apologetically, 'but I was so sorry for the poor girl, and Mrs. Romney was so hard on her.'

'What girl? Have you been talking to anyone?' asked Oliver, with sudden suspicion. And

then Elsie related what had happened. Oliver listened silently until she had finished.

'I am glad you gave her the flowers, darling; it was a kind thought; but I am going to ask you not to mention this little occurrence to my mother or Romney. Mrs. Romney is peculiar, and likes to keep her protégées to herself; she is very generous, and you can understand——' But here Oliver found it difficult to finish his sentence.

'I never meant to tell anyone but you, Oliver. I thought I ought to tell you everything.' And this reply was so sweet in Captain Carfax's ear that he changed the whole subject abruptly, and Elsie ceased to regret her impulsive generosity when she found Oliver did not mind.

As they were crossing the lawn to the house a few minutes afterwards, they came upon Mrs. Romney. She was organizing a set of Lancers, and seemed full of animation. She flushed for a moment when she saw Elsie. Then she addressed Oliver. 'You must be my partner,' she said, with peremptory playfulness. 'Romney declares I must open the ball and set the young people an example. Will you spare him to me, Elsie?' And Elsie nodded assent.

She seated herself on one of the benches, and watched them. It struck her that between the figures they talked rather gravely together. By-and-by Oliver relapsed into his old languid manner, but Mrs. Romney looked hot and tired, and her animation seemed gone. She sat down beside

Elsie when the dance was over. 'Oliver has not been a bit nice to me,' she remarked, rather querulously. 'Do you think one's brother-in-law has a right to lecture one? Oliver is always scolding me now, and I find it depressing. I like people to be pleased with me.' And Mrs. Romney's eyes looked a little plaintive.

The next moment Gussie and Mr. Lockhart came up to them. Gussie's gentle little mouse-like face was beaming with happiness. Rab looked like a boy who was thoroughly enjoying his holiday.

'Have you had a good time?' asked Mrs. Romney, in a sympathetic voice; and then she added mischievously, 'I heard someone admiring your frock just now. It is certainly one of the prettiest here. You must have a good dress-maker, Gussie.' And this speech covered Gussie with confusion.

'Dear Mrs. Romney, how can you?' she said helplessly, and then her eyes began to brighten. 'Ah, I have had such a lovely time! I have never enjoyed myself so much in my life. And Mr. Lockhart has been so kind; he did not mind all my stupid mistakes at tennis.'

'Miss Poole only needs assurance,' returned Rab gallantly. 'By-the-by, Mrs. Romney, we witnessed a very pretty little scene just now. Who was that young lady whom you were consoling so kindly down by the gate? She seemed in trouble, poor thing!'

'I suppose you mean a poor little girl whom I know slightly,' returned Mrs. Romney carelessly. 'Ah, here comes my husband; I am afraid I must run away.' But Mr. Lockhart detained her.

'I suppose she lives in Draycott; I seem always meeting her. She has fair hair, which she wears in a childish fashion, and she is generally dressed in an old pink frock. I followed her to Church Street once, and——'

'Were you looking for me, Romney? I suppose some of the people are going.' And Mrs. Romney took her husband's arm.

'Wait a moment, Kitty; there is no hurry. I want to speak to Rab first.' And Mrs. Romney made a little gesture of impatience.

'They were your flowers, Miss Vaughan,' Rab was saying, a little pertinaciously; 'I could swear to them—a posy of tea-roses, tied with a gold-coloured ribbon.'

'Have you lost your flowers, Elsie?' asked the Squire with surprise; but Mrs. Romney did not wait for her answer.

'What a fuss you are making, Mr. Lockhart!' she said irritably. 'It is very simple. Elsie gave her flowers to a poor girl in whom I am interested; it was very sweet of her, but she certainly did not intend her kindness to be made public. Don't you hate to hear your good deeds flaunted before your face, Elsie? I agree with the French saying, "Defend me from my friends; I can defend myself

from my enemies."' And Mrs. Romney's tone was a little haughty.

'I don't understand Mrs. Romney as well as I used,' confided Rab to his companion presently; 'she is uncertain—very uncertain.' But Gussie's loyalty refused to admit this; Mrs. Romney was simply perfect in her eyes.

'She is the dear—the dearest friend I ever had. No one has ever shown me so much kindness. There is nothing that I would not do for her,' finished Gussie, with tremulous zeal. To do Gussie justice, she never changed this opinion of her early friend, and in future days young Mrs. Rab Lockhart often declared to her delighted husband that she owed the happiness of her life to her dear Mrs. Romney. 'For you would never have seen me, Rab,' she would add pathetically, 'if she had not asked me to the Frythe, and to this day I should have been a poor little drudge of a daily governess if you had not made me the happiest woman in the world.'

'Never was there a more suitable marriage,' Mrs. Romney would say to herself when she saw Gussie's beaming face. Rab's pride in his wife was intense. Anyone but Gussie would have been utterly spoiled; in his simple enthusiasm Rab changed the name of his house to The Dovecot, 'for it is so much more expressive than The Hut,' observed the little man, in a tone of supreme satisfaction.

CHAPTER XI

THE DOOR IN THE SHRUBBERY

'More water glideth by the mill
Than wots the miller of.'
Titus Andronicus.

LATER on that evening Elsie sat out on the veranda enjoying the still fragrance of the night; behind her was the soft yellow glow of the lamps, and in front the lake shone fitfully under the starlight, and a row of tall white lilies glimmered faintly in the darkness.

Oliver had just left her in response to a summons from his brother, and a moment later Mrs. Romney stepped out on the veranda. As she stood in the circle of brightness, Elsie thought she looked like a picture.

She wore a dress of soft amber silk, and her arms gleamed ivory-white under the quaintly-cut sleeves; a moment afterwards she raised them to her head with a childish gesture of weariness that was nevertheless full of grace, and then she sank into the hammock-chair that Oliver had just vacated. 'Oh, how tired I am!' she murmured.

'No wonder you are tired,' was Elsie's reply. 'Oliver says you have done the work of half a dozen women to-day. It is late—nearly eleven. Why do you not go to bed?'

'I hate going to bed unless one is sure to sleep,

and I should only lie awake for hours. What an awfully complex thing life is, after all!'

'To me it seems perfectly simple,' returned Elsie cheerfully.

'To you!'—with a low laugh. 'You innocent little creature, what do you know of life? I was envying you this afternoon, Elsie; you looked like a happy child who had no past.'

'Do you mean that you would change places with me?'

'No, indeed!' And, in spite of her fatigue, Mrs. Romney's tone was full of energy. 'With all my difficulties, I would not change places with any living woman. Do you suppose that Oliver, with all his goodness, can hold a candle to my Romney? Elsie, have you any idea what he has done for me?' And here her manner changed, and her voice was full of emotion. 'He brought happiness into my life, and before I knew him it was full of care.'

'Were you so very poor, then?' asked Elsie, a little curiously; but Mrs. Romney did not seem to resent the question.

'Yes, horribly poor. If I were not as shabby as Gussie, it was only that my self-respect would not permit me to be shabby. I was too proud to allow my poverty to appear. I would rather have sat up all night to turn an old gown than wear it until it became an eyesore. Romney told me once soon after we were engaged that I always dressed so well. How I laughed to hear him! And yet I

could have cried, too, to think of all my miserable little shifts. Do you know, Elsie, that my husband was obliged to pay for my wedding outfit? Most people would be ashamed to own that; but, with all my pride, I am not a bit ashamed. I delight to owe everything to him.' And the glow of feeling on Mrs. Romney's face made her positively beautiful.

'I wonder if I could ever feel like that,' murmured Elsie, half to herself; but Mrs. Romney heard her.

'No, don't wonder; we are very different people, and our circumstances are too dissimilar for comparisons. Besides, comparisons are odious things. My life has been an ordeal, and yours has rippled on as smoothly as a little brook. I read once in some book that there were no such things as conflicting duties; that the term was an anomaly—almost an impossibility. But I differ from this; it seems to me that most of the misery of life comes from the effort to reconcile conflicting duties.'

'Oliver would disagree with you there,' began Elsie, but Mrs. Romney interrupted her almost impatiently:

'Please don't quote Oliver; he is a severe critic. He has such terribly hard-and-fast rules. He declares a well-balanced mind can always discern the right path, that there can be but one right and one wrong, and that it is the endeavour to act Providence that so often leads us astray.'

'I almost think Oliver is right.'

'He is right in a way, but he does not discriminate. Elsie, I am afraid I shall shock your innocence, but do you think it is possible to be true—absolutely true—in this world?'

'Most certainly I do.' And Elsie's tone was somewhat distressed.

'That shows your simplicity, child. I do not want to shock you; I have never told a lie—a real lie—in my life, and I hope that I never shall; but, all the same, one has to act it sometimes.'

'No, no.'

'I tell you yes; and then it is not possible to be always strictly accurate. I saw you were a little surprised this afternoon when I told Rab that I knew that child slightly. I am very quick, and I could see from your manner that you thought I was misleading him; but he had no right to be so inquisitive. I was merely on the defensive against unwarrantable curiosity.'

'I can understand that.'

'Oh, but you thought me hard to her; but you cannot judge, Elsie. I have been very kind to her; I was her best friend, but she was wrong to disobey me. I never allow my protégées or pensioners to come to the house; it is really my mother-in-law's house. All my good deeds are done by stealth. She ought to have respected my wishes.'

'She is very young,' pleaded Elsie.

'She is nearly fifteen, and circumstances should have made her older than she is; but she is

lamentably childish. 'She is a tender plant that needs sunshine to thrive.' And here she sighed, and then abruptly changed the subject; but a little later, when Elsie was bidding her good-night, she looked at her rather pathetically. 'Don't distrust me if you can help it, dear. I try to be as good as I can, and I never want to do wrong.' And then she gave an odd little laugh and left her.

Two or three days passed. Gussie had gone back to her home, on the understanding that the visit was shortly to be repeated; and Elsie and Oliver spent their time riding about the country or playing tennis with their neighbours.

One wet afternoon they had betaken themselves to the billiard-room for amusement, and had indulged afterwards in a game of shuttlecock and battledore, in which Mrs. Romney had joined them; and Sir Henry had had his chair wheeled into the corridor, that he might watch the players.

The rain ceased towards evening, and after dinner they all gathered in the veranda while Mrs. Romney sang to them.

By-and-by the Squire strolled off to his smoking-room, and Oliver went in search of a book he was reading. Elsie, left to herself, went down the veranda step and sauntered aimlessly down one of the paths. The clouds had broken, and a faint watery moon just showed itself; the air was sweet with the scent of lilies, and Elsie was enjoying the freshness, when she suddenly started—a dark

figure had glided from the bushes, and crossed her path. But the next moment her courage returned. It was a woman, probably one of the servants who had been sent on some errand, and was returning to the house, and she was about to pass her, when a gleam of fair hair caught her eyes, and, in spite of the disguising waterproof, she recognised the young girl whom Mrs. Romney had called Eva.

'Is it you?' she exclaimed, in some natural surprise. 'Are you wanting to see anyone?'

'Yes, please,' in an eager whisper. 'I must see Catherine—I mean Mrs. Romney. Would you bring her to me? Oh, I know,' clasping her hands with a gesture of distress, 'she was very angry when she saw me looking at the dancing the other day. She said I had no right to be here; but—but—I must speak to her. I have walked all this way in the rain to let her know.'

'To let her know what? Don't be afraid; I will do anything I can to help you. But how wet you are—dreadfully wet! and you look so tired! And, oh dear, you have been crying!' for a sudden gleam of moonlight showed her the poor girl's swollen eyes; but the genuine kindness of Elsie's tone only set the tears flowing again.

'Please forgive me. I cannot help crying; I am so tired and miserable, and I want Catherine. Please, please will you tell her when no one is near that I am here, and that I must speak to her? I have been here ever so long listening to her singing,

and I could not help crying to think how sorry she would be if she knew I was standing outside in the wet.'

'I will go to her at once. Don't fret any more. I will tell her not to be angry. But I hear footsteps; someone is looking for me.' And the girl glided swiftly behind some shrubs.

'What are you doing, Elsie, in that damp place?' and Mrs. Romney's voice was somewhat sharp. 'I heard voices. To whom were you talking? Oh, Eva,' with a start, as the girl, reassured, stepped out of her hiding-place, 'how can you—how dare you try me in this way?'

'I could not help it, Catherine. You must not be angry; he is very ill, and I was so frightened that I was obliged to come to you. I thought he was dying, and——'

'Elsie dear,' and Mrs. Romney's voice was singularly agitated, 'please go back to the house and try and find Oliver. Tell him to come to the door in the shrubbery; he will find me there. But on no account let my husband know; he will be angry with me for exposing myself to this damp. But you see for yourself this poor child is in trouble, and I must help her—I must.'

Elsie ran back to the house at once; but, to her dismay, the Squire had reappeared with his cigar, and he and Oliver were having an argument in the veranda. Oliver gave her a nod, as much as to say, 'Please do not interrupt us'; but the Squire hardly noticed her.

What was to be done? They were in the heat of a political discussion. A remark had brought on the dispute. The Squire had his paper in his hand, and had just quoted a paragraph, and Oliver had retorted contemptuously that the statesman in question was an old woman, and that his information was unreliable, and the Squire had fired up in a moment.

Elsie was in despair. Oliver was not generally dense, but the subject interested him, and he was slow to take her hints when she tried to attract his attention. He thought it was girlish coquetry, and only gave her an affectionate smile. She was quite at her wits' end to know what to do, until a happy idea came to her, and five minutes later Oliver found a folded slip of paper between his fingers; in the obscure light she had pushed it unnoticed into his hand.

This had the desired effect, and the next moment Oliver strolled to the window under the pretext of relighting his cigar. When he read Elsie's scrawl, his manner changed:

'Mrs. Romney wants to speak to you. She is by the door in the shrubbery. That girl is with her.'

'I have got stiff with sitting. I think I will have a prowl,' he observed casually, when he rejoined them.

'I will take a turn with you,' replied his brother amiably, and Oliver and Elsie exchanged glances. Oliver raised his eyebrows; it was impossible to shake off the Squire when he was in a mood for

argument. 'There's no help for it,' he muttered, as he went down the steps.

Elsie watched them until they were out of sight, and then she ran quickly down the shrubbery-path; her footsteps were so light on the grass border that she reached them unperceived.

They were standing beside the half-open door that led into the road. Mrs. Romney's arms were round the girl, and Eva's face was hidden on her shoulder, and Mrs. Romney's voice was as tender as though she were speaking to her child.

'You must not lose courage, darling. Think what a comfort you are to me!'

'But there is so little I can do,' sobbed the girl. 'All day long it is the same thing over and over again: "Do you think Catherine will come?" "I want Catherine!" It breaks my heart to hear him.'

'You are breaking mine when you tell me that. Dearest, there is nothing for us but patience. Ah, Elsie,' in a flurried tone, 'how you startled me! Have you come to tell us that you cannot find Oliver?'

'Mr. Carfax is with him. I wrote your message on a bit of paper, but he cannot come just yet.'

'Then there is only one thing to be done. You must go home, Eva, and trust me to do what I can for you. You will be brave; you will not be afraid,' looking at the girl anxiously; but Eva recoiled with visible alarm at the sight of the dark road that lay beyond the gate.

'Oh, how dark it is! I am almost afraid to let

go your hand, Catherine. Must I go all that way alone?'

'My darling, there is no help for it. Would I let you go alone if I could help it? But there is nothing to fear; these country roads are so safe. Pluck up your courage, dear; nothing will hurt you. I will stand here until you are safely round that dark corner, and you can see the village. Walk out boldly; no one will speak to you.'

'If I am frightened I shall run. Don't laugh at me, Catherine; I am not brave like you.'

'I am not brave at all, my sweet,' kissing her. 'Now go, go, or my husband will hear us.' She put her gently outside the gate, and stood there listening anxiously to the faltering, uneven footsteps. She had quite forgotten Elsie's existence. 'Poor child!' she murmured to herself—'my poor frightened little Eva!' and she quite started when Elsie's voice sounded close to her.

'What does it all mean, Mrs. Romney? How fond you seem of that girl!'

'Yes, I am fond of her,' she answered, rather shortly. 'I love all young helpless things, and Eva is so terribly sensitive; she had a bad illness once, and a fright, and her nerves have never recovered from it. Now help me to regain the house without my husband discovering me, or I shall be lectured severely for my imprudence.' But, though Mrs. Romney tried to laugh, there was no mirth in her voice, and the laugh ended in a long-drawn sigh.

CHAPTER XII

'WILL YOU DO ME A FAVOUR?'

'What, what, what! ill luck, ill luck!'
Merchant of Venice.

ELSIE returned to her room that night in a sorely perplexed frame of mind.

In spite of her youth and ignorance of the world, she could no longer shut her eyes to the fact that some strange secret was connected with the mysterious visit of this young girl, and that, notwithstanding Mrs. Romney's seeming frankness, she was not acting in a perfectly straightforward manner. Eva was no ordinary protégée, no mere recipient of a large-hearted bounty—Elsie was quite sure of that. The passionate tenderness of Mrs. Romney's tones still rang in her ears: 'You must not lose courage, darling. Think what a comfort you are to me!' And again: 'Poor child! my poor frightened little Eva!' Why was she so anxious to shield her from her husband's notice? what could all this secrecy mean? and why was Oliver her confidant? It was this latter point that troubled her. Oliver was surely the last person in the world to give his sanction or countenance to any unworthy concealment; in her heart Elsie knew that she could trust him blindly, but all the same the mystery fretted and baffled her.

It was no use going to bed; she was far too wide awake. For a long time she waited, hoping that Mrs. Romney would come to her and offer some sort of explanation for her extraordinary behaviour; but more than an hour passed, and she gave no sign. She tried to read, but the least sound attracted her attention, and made her lay down the book. Why was Oliver sitting up so late? He generally went to bed long before this. She could hear the Squire going his rounds, and then footsteps passed her door. To her relief, Oliver was with him; she could distinctly hear his voice, lowered purposely so as not to disturb her.

'Good-night, old fellow; pleasant dreams to you!' but the Squire's reply was not audible.

Elsie took the book again; she was not sleepy yet, and she might as well finish the chapter; it proved interesting, and she read another, and then she gave a sudden start; footsteps were passing her door again, the door opposite unclosed softly. A sudden overwhelming curiosity made Elsie open hers, and the subdued sound of voices reached her ear. Who could be talking at this late hour? Was Harry ill, and had his nurse summoned Mrs. Romney? This thought made Elsie venture out into the corridor, but the nursery door was fast shut, and the sound proceeded evidently from the staircase. The next moment she was peeping over the balustrade. To her intense chagrin, she saw Mrs. Romney, still in her evening dress, with a shawl thrown over her, talking to Oliver.

But it was Oliver's appearance that surprised her most. He had changed his clothes, and was in his light tweed morning suit, and his hat was in his hand. It was long past midnight, and yet he was going out. Elsie could bear no more, and, without stopping to consider what they would think of her, she ran noiselessly down the stairs. Mrs. Romney gave a faint shriek when she saw the little white figure flash suddenly into sight, but Oliver, with hardly a change of countenance, put out his hand to her. He looked grave and more impassive than ever.

'What is the matter?' asked Elsie breathlessly. 'Why are you going out? Is anyone ill?' And then, as Oliver did not at once reply, she turned to Mrs. Romney a little angrily: 'Why are you sending him out? It is your fault. You are always making him do things, and he does not like it.'

'Why should you interfere, Elsie? You will spoil everything. Go to bed, like a good girl, and leave me to manage my own business. Oliver is doing me a great kindness; he is a dear good fellow.' Mrs. Romney spoke excitedly, but there was no temper in her tone; she was putting Elsie off as though she were a child, and the girl resented it.

'It is cruel of you to send him out in the middle of the night! What is the reason of all this mystery? Oliver, why don't you answer me? I have a right to know. You are not treating me well, you and Mrs. Romney.'

'No, darling, we are not, and you have every right to reprove us.' And Oliver tightened his hold of the little hands, and looked at her quietly. 'Catherine, you are making trouble between me and Elsie with these foolish mysteries; you are risking not only your own peace, but ours. Let me put a stop to it by telling her the truth.'

'Not to-night! Oh no, Oliver! I have your promise, and I cannot release you to-night! If Elsie loves you she will trust you. Why are you wasting time with all this nonsense? At any moment Romney may wake and miss me.' And she almost wrung her hands with impatience.

'You hear what Catherine says, Elsie: she will not allow me to clear myself.' But Elsie, touched to the heart by the suppressed pain of his voice, interrupted him:

'Don't look so troubled, Oliver. It is not your fault; I am sure of that. Nothing shall make mischief between us. I trust you; I know you are true as steel. There, go—go, if you must.' And she was turning away, but he caught her almost passionately in his arms.

'I will never forget this! Thanks a thousand times, my darling—my loyal darling! Come and let me out at the conservatory door, Catherine, and let me get this business over. Go back to your room, Elsie, and sleep as sweetly as you deserve to sleep.'

Elsie retraced her steps, and went swiftly to her window; it overlooked the path that led from the

conservatory. The next moment Oliver passed, and waved his hand in recognition, but he did not speak. She stood there for a few moments lost in thought, until the sound of her own door opening made her turn her head as Mrs. Romney came hurriedly into the room. She looked pale and worried, and spoke in a hesitating manner:

'I am very sorry, Elsie. I would not pain you or Oliver for worlds, but I cannot help myself to-night. You were very dear and good to him, and he has gone off quite happily. You are a generous-hearted girl.'

Elsie drew up her white chin a little proudly.

'Nothing can make me distrust Oliver,' she said coldly.

Mrs. Romney looked at her rather sadly.

'No, you only distrust me; you think I have no right to have secrets from my husband. Ah, you cannot judge. One day perhaps you will be more lenient. I cannot stop now, Elsie; Romney may wake any minute. He thinks I am with Harry; the child was a little feverish to-night, so I told him I should not undress yet. I wish you could have said something kind to me; my heart is heavy enough as it is.' And here she suddenly broke down and sobbed in a distressing manner. 'Oh, my poor head!' she said—'my poor tired head!' And she laid it against the dressing-table.

This sudden loss of self-control frightened Elsie, and, forgetting her own grievances, she knelt down

by Mrs. Romney and begged her to be calm, and in a few minutes she raised her head and began drying her eyes.

'No, it is no use crying; nothing can relieve me to-night. I have a dead weight here, Elsie,' touching her chest, 'a sickening dead weight, and it hurts me. Things are coming to a crisis, and I shall be undone. I have done no wrong in my Maker's eyes, but, all the same, I shall be undone. There, let me go; you are very kind, but it is impossible for you to help me. If it were not for Oliver I should go mad.'

'I am very sorry for you,' returned Elsie mechanically; but Mrs. Romney made no answer. She stood for a moment with the shawl dropping from her shoulders, and leaving her white neck uncovered, so that Elsie could see the piteous quivering in the muscles of the throat. Then she turned silently to the door, opened and then closed it noiselessly, and Elsie was left alone. The air had become damp and chilly, and the candles were catching a draught. Elsie hastily undressed and extinguished them. She meant to lie awake and watch for Oliver's return, but before ten minutes had elapsed she was fast asleep, and only the maid's busy movements about her room roused her the next morning.

The first person she saw when she went downstairs was Oliver. He came out of the conservatory with some roses, his usual morning offering to his young betrothed, and put them in her hand

silently. Elsie looked at him rather anxiously; he seemed fagged and tired.

'Were you out long, Oliver?' she whispered.

'I have only just returned,' was his reply. 'Don't wait for me, Elsie; I must have my tub before breakfast. Mrs. Romney is in there,' pointing to the dining-room; and he hurried off, to prevent further questions.

Mrs. Romney was sorting the letters at the side-table. She beckoned quickly to Elsie. She looked as though she had not slept all night, and her voice spoke of some terrible strain. 'Elsie, will you do me a favour? It is urgent. Think of something you need in Draycott that you must have without fail, and ask me to drive you in. 'Hush! I hear Romney's voice.' And she turned again to the letters.

'I must have some more yellow floss silk for my work, and I can only match it myself,' returned Elsie very naturally as the Squire entered, but she stifled a sudden impatience as she spoke. More mysteries, more underhand plans; she was growing weary of them. 'I suppose one can match silks at Draycott?'

'Oh dear yes! I will drive you there as soon as I have given cook her orders.'

'Eh, what? Shopping again, Mrs. Kitty? Why should you fash yourself with driving into Draycott this hot morning? Elsie can go with me in the dogcart. I have nothing on earth to do, and you have had a bad night with Harry.'

'A drive will do me good, Romney,' pleaded his wife—'will it not, Elsie? There is nothing like fresh air for picking one up.'

'That is what I always say,' returned Elsie quickly. 'A good ride after a ball does one all the good in the world. I hope you will come with me, Mrs. Romney, for I want your advice about a smock for Harry; I have promised to make him one.'

Mrs. Romney flashed a grateful look at her, and her hand trembled as she poured out the coffee. 'I should like to come with you, dear,' she said gently; and the Squire, who was in a high good humour over his letters, only rallied her for her obstinacy and self-will, and the subject dropped until Oliver entered the room, when the Squire casually observed that the ladies were driving in to Draycott. Oliver fixed his eyes inquiringly on his sister-in-law, but she gave him a quick sign, and he asked no questions until he found himself alone with Elsie.

'Are you sure you do not mind, Elsie?'

'I mind very much,' was her candid answer. 'I hate the very name of Draycott; but Mrs. Romney begged me to do her this favour. Oh, I hope we shall not be long.'

'I am afraid you will, poor little Elsie. You are being martyred between us. I never loved you as I did last night; I must tell you that now, darling.' And Oliver managed to say a good deal more, until Elsie's cheek burnt with his praises; and she drove

off blushing like a rose and quite oblivious of Mrs. Romney's harassed looks.

Neither of them felt any inclination for conversation, and not a word was spoken until the tower of St. Mary's came in sight, and then Mrs. Romney leaned forward in the wagonette and said hurriedly:

'I have asked Archer to put me down at the corner of Church Street. You can do your shopping without me, I know. Be as long as you can. Why not go to the library and order some new books? Do not come for me for at least an hour. I will join you as soon as I am ready.'

Elsie nodded, and proceeded to carry out her instructions; but she never found it so difficult to while away an hour. She matched her silks, and then went to the library; then she discovered that she was hungry and would like a bun, and Archer had orders to drive her to the best confectioner's. She had provided herself with an ice and a Bath bun, when her enjoyment was marred by the entrance of Mr. Lockhart; he spied her at once, and a beaming smile came over his face.

'Well, this is luck!' he said exultingly, as he shook hands. 'I was looking out for you ladies. I called at the Frythe to see if I could do any errands for anyone, and the Squire volunteered to drive in with me; he is at the club, reading the papers; but he told me to look out for the wagonette, as he means to drive back with you. What have you done with Mrs. Romney?'

'She has some business. I shall call for her presently,' stammered Elsie. 'When did you say the Squire would be ready for us?'

'Oh, in about a quarter of an hour. You are to drive to the club for him. By-the-by, Miss Vaughan, I met Miss Poole in Hart Street,' and here the little man's face became alarmingly pink; 'she looked like a ghost, and seemed as down as possible; that stepmother of hers had been bullying her. I suppose,' clearing his throat with difficulty, 'that Mrs. Romney has not invited her again to the Frythe; it would do her a world of good, I am quite sure of that.'

'I will tell Mrs. Romney what you say; Miss Poole is a great favourite of hers, and she is always so sorry for her. She is a very nice girl. I like her very much.' Elsie hardly knew what she said: she was dying to get rid of Mr. Lockhart, but the little man stuck to her pertinaciously. He plied her with questions. Did she not think Miss Poole an exceedingly amiable person, intelligent too? oh yes, he was quite sure that she was intelligent; she read Carlyle and Ruskin, and then she was devoted to poetry, and—well, he must confess he had a sneaking fancy for the old-fashioned poets himself—Pope's 'Rape of the Lock,' for example: could anything be more racy and delightful than Belinda's toilet? He begged pardon; he feared he was delaying Miss Vaughan; for Elsie had at last risen in desperation.

'I must go. I shall be late,' she said hurriedly.

'Please do not come with me, Mr. Lockhart.' But Rab was not to be shunted in that way; he handed Elsie into the wagonette with elaborate politeness, and stood bareheaded on the pavement until he received her parting smile. Elsie could only hope that her direction to drive to Church Street was not overheard. She looked up at the market clock as they drove past. In six or seven minutes the Squire would be standing in front of the club, looking out for them. There was only one thing to do; she must go herself to No. 27 and warn Mrs. Romney. There was no other course open to her; and directly the wagonette stopped, she let herself out and ran down the street.

The door was open. Elsie knocked softly, and then louder; but, to her surprise, no one came, and after a minute's irresolution she stepped into the narrow passage and peeped into the shabby little sitting-room. It was quite empty, and looked as though it had been unoccupied for weeks. The coloured antimacassars hung in faultless folds; some smart-looking books were ranged at equal distances round the centre table; no one seemed moving about the kitchen except a black cat, who mewed at Elsie in rather a dismal fashion, but a faint creaking overhead attracted her attention.

Elsie was at her wits' end; but at last, in desperation, she began to ascend the narrow, steep flight of stairs. As she did so, the shabby, frayed druggeting attracted her attention. The people who lived here must be dreadfully poor, she thought;

but the next moment she gave a violent start. Mrs. Romney's voice sounded quite close to her; it proceeded from a room just opposite the staircase.

'Give me the wine, Eva; he is getting faint again. Oh, why, why does not Dr. Evans come? Father, father dear, you must drink this; it is Catherine who is giving it to you.'

Elsie held her breath and crept to the door. That agonized voice made her shiver. Mrs. Romney's back was towards her; she was kneeling beside the bed, and supporting a gray-haired man in her arms. Elsie had a glimpse of the worn, emaciated features, then Eva's fair head obstructed her view.

'Drink it, daddy,' she said, in a sobbing voice; but a wasted hand waved it away.

'It is poisoned,' returned the invalid, in a hollow voice. 'She said she would do for me. She is the curse of my life, and she is killing me slowly every day. Catherine,' rousing up with fitful energy, 'don't let her come here; hide me away from her. And hide Eva, too. She is cruel to Eva; I saw the bruises on the child's arm myself. When she drinks she is like a fury, and she hates us both.'

'There is no one here, father, but Eva and your own Kitty. No one shall hurt you, never again—never again. "He shall wipe the tears off from all faces." Do you remember those words, dear? From yours, from mine, when in His good time I shall have earned my rest. See, I am tasting the

wine, and it is good, for it comes from my husband's cellar. Now you will take it, like a dear good father, for your poor Catherine's sake.'

'Mrs. Romney,' Elsie's voice almost breathed into her ear, and Mrs. Romney's white face turned on her full of startled indignation.

'You here? How dare you intrude on my privacy?' Her voice was purposely lowered, but her gray eyes flashed with anger. The old man clutched her convulsively:

'Who is that, Catherine? Send her away. I will see no one.'

'It is a friend, father,' her voice melting into tenderness. 'She has a good heart, and will not do us any harm. Go away, Elsie. You see how it is: I cannot and will not leave my father.'

CHAPTER XIII

THE SQUIRE IS MASTERFUL

'Thank God, bless God, all ye who suffer not
More grief than ye can weep for. That is well;
That is light grieving.'

E. B. BROWNING.

MRS. ROMNEY pronounced these words with a sort of feverish determination, but Elsie stooped down and whispered in her ear:

'You must leave him. The Squire is in the town; Mr. Lockhart told me so; he is at the

club, expecting us. He intends to drive back in the wagonette.'

'Romney at his club!' She gasped out the words with incredulous dismay.

'Yes, and at this very minute he will be looking for us. Mrs. Romney, you must come.' And Catherine, with a dazed look, rose from her knees.

'That is why you are here to warn me. Thank you, Elsie. Father dear, I must leave you for a little while.' But the sick man detained her; a terrified expression came into his sunken eyes.

'You must not leave me. I will not be left with the child. What is she to do if that woman comes? She will take away the doctor's stuff and drink the wine; that is what she did when poor little Eva was ill. Kitty, if you go away you will be an unnatural daughter. What! Leave your poor dying father! Shame—shame on you, Catherine!'

'Hush, father! you are cruel to agitate yourself in this way—cruel to me and Eva. You shall not be alone long. The nurse Oliver saw will be here directly, and Dr. Evans promised to look in again.'

'I will not have them. You know my dislike to strangers. I will have no one about me but you. Why must you leave me, Kitty? Surely your husband is not so unforgiving as to keep us apart now I am dying.'

'Father, you are breaking my heart!' And Mrs. Romney kissed the gray head almost despairingly. 'You are not dying; you shall not die.

Let me go, and I will come soon again.' And she tore herself away.

'Must you really go, Catherine?' and Eva stole timidly to her side. 'He is really worse, and——'

'No, no; the wine has given him strength. Go back to him and talk to him cheerfully. You have nothing to fear, darling; Nurse Miriam will be with you directly. Now, Elsie.' And she led the way downstairs.

'We are very late,' Elsie murmured, as they took their places.

'Late, are we?' with a sudden look of alarm. 'Elsie, you must help me with Romney, for I am almost worn out. Tell me,' with sudden agitation, 'do you think that he—my father—is dying? I have never seen anyone die.'

'He looks very ill,' returned Elsie cautiously, but in her secret heart she felt the old man's days were numbered. She had no time to say more, for the Squire's tall figure was in sight, and, to Elsie's dismay, Rab Lockhart was with him. The little man seemed ubiquitous.

'Have we kept you waiting, dear?' asked Mrs. Romney, trying to speak in her usual manner; but her voice was hardly under control.

'Kept me waiting?' returned the Squire wrathfully. 'Are you aware I have been kicking up my heels in this blazing sun for the last half-hour? Rab tells me he gave my message to Elsie nearly three-quarters of an hour ago.'

'Oh yes, we got your message, but we had not

finished all our business. How do you do, Mr. Lockhart? Are you waiting there in the hope of seeing Gussie pass? Jump in, Romney; it is no use waiting any longer.' But the Squire, who for once was out of temper, considered this speech as only an aggravation of the offence.

'Upon my word, Catherine, you are a cool hand! You might have the grace to say you are sorry for keeping me waiting. No, thanks,' as Rab, with good-natured officiousness, opened the door. 'I shall take the reins from Archer.' And with a decidedly sulky look and the air of a martyr the Squire mounted the box.

Catherine drew a long sigh of relief, but she spoke no word; but Rab whispered confidentially: 'He'll be as sweet as a nut when he has had his luncheon and a pipe'; but the words were almost jerked out of his mouth, for the Squire had touched up Jess and Jasper so smartly that they curveted wildly, and then dashed across the market-place.

Elsie gave a little cry of alarm, and Rab stood in the middle of the road, looking after them anxiously. But he need not have troubled himself; the Squire was a splendid whip, and his spirited horses were entirely under his control.

Mrs. Romney leaned back in her corner. Her hands were clasped on her lap, and her eyes were full of tears. 'He is vexed with me,' she said, as though to herself, 'and I do not wonder at it.'

But the Squire could not long keep up his grievance, and his displeasure soon evaporated.

Before many minutes were over he was carrying on a jerky conversation with Elsie over his shoulder, and by-and-by there was an admonition to Kitty to look out sharp at something. Mrs. Romney, who was crying silently behind her sun-shade, tried to answer him, but her words failed to reach him. 'Tell him the sun has made my head ache,' she whispered, and Elsie repeated the message. But this harmless excuse only fanned the slumbering embers of his wrath again. Any ailment of his Kitty, however trifling, was a serious matter in his eyes.

'Another headache!' he muttered, and then he suddenly checked the horses just as they were passing a large red-brick house, and Archer was despatched to the gate with a message.

Mrs. Romney got up from her seat in a hurry:

'Why have you sent Archer to Dr. Fergusson, Romney?'

'Because I wish him to look in some time this afternoon,' returned her husband coolly. 'I have heard enough of these headaches, and I intend him to take you in hand properly. You have not been yourself for the last two or three weeks, and I shall ask him to put you to rights.'

'You are very absurd, Romney. I am perfectly well, and Dr. Fergusson will only laugh at us both.' But the Squire made no answer to this and Catherine gave a weary little sigh as she went back to her corner. She knew too well that it was useless to contend with Romney when he was

in one of these masterful moods, but the idea of being restrained and treated as an invalid was galling in the extreme.

Catherine was in that painful state of intense nervous tension when even a louder voice than usual made her tremble from head to foot. She could eat no luncheon, and made her headache a pretext for retiring from the table.

'I hope you consider that I have done a wise thing in asking Dr. Fergusson to call,' observed her husband as he opened the door for her; but a few minutes later he followed her to her room.

Strange to say, the strong big man had the thoughtfulness and light touch of a woman in a sick-room. His irritation had died a natural death the moment he saw Catherine was really suffering, though he had no idea that it was mental and not bodily pain that made her contract her forehead and clinch her delicate hands. He shaded the windows carefully, and arranged the pillows on her couch; then he helped her unloosen the heavy braids of hair that seemed to oppress her. As he did so, she suddenly drew his hand to her lips. 'Oh, my darling,' she whispered, 'love me—love me always as well as you do now, or I could not live.' But the Squire frowned as though this little outburst displeased him.

'Now you are hysterical again,' he said, in rather a repressive voice. 'My dear child, I insist on your keeping yourself quiet until Fergusson comes. He will soon put you to rights. Shut

your eyes, and try to sleep. I shall go downstairs and keep the house as quiet as possible.' But she caught hold of his coat-sleeve.

'Have you forgiven me, have you quite forgiven me, for keeping you waiting?'

'Forgiven? Nonsense!' and he kissed her forehead. 'But I shall be angry with you in earnest if you say another word;' and the Squire crept noiselessly out of the room. But his honest heart would have been wrung if he could have seen Catherine lying face downward on the couch trying to control her sobs.

'If I have done wrong, if I have been weak, cowardly, it was because I loved you too much,' she moaned, 'because I dared not let you know my disobedience. Oh, God help me! What shall I do—what shall I do if he ever finds out that I have deceived him?'

Elsie had not yet found herself alone with Oliver. Some visitors had driven over after luncheon, and Lady Carfax had needed their presence in the drawing-room. Before they left, Dr. Fergusson paid his visit, but it was some time before Romney joined them.

He seemed in rather a perturbed state of mind. Oliver had just left the room on some errand or other, and Elsie and Lady Carfax were alone.

'Well, Romney, what does Dr. Fergusson say about Catherine?' asked Lady Carfax tranquilly. She did not herself think that there was much

amiss with her daughter-in-law, only if Catherine's finger ached Romney made a fuss.

'He says that her nerves are in a most unsatisfactory state,' returned her son gloomily—'that she is suffering from some mental pressure or strain. He saw her alone, and he assures me that he questioned her very closely, and that he is convinced that she has something on her mind, and, though she would not allow this, she did not exactly contradict him.'

'What an absurd idea!' returned Lady Carfax impatiently. 'I hope you told him that Catherine was the happiest creature in the world. Her spirits are excellent. Why, she is the life of the house. No, no; she has been doing too much, and is a little below par. She wants a tonic to set her up.'

'I wish I could agree with you, mother; but it seems to me that Catherine has flagged lately, and her spirits certainly have not been as good as usual. Don't you remember that evening when she was so hysterical? And she has been shedding tears more than once. She is irritable, too. I wonder,' with a worried expression, 'if anything can be troubling her!'

'Troubling her? Of course not,' with the utmost scorn, for Lady Carfax had scant sympathy with nerves. 'You are well, and Harry is well, and the servants do their duty. What should trouble a strong, healthy, happy young woman? I always said Dr. Fergusson is an alarmist. He

always takes the worst view of your poor father's case. Well, what does he advise? What remedies does he intend to prescribe?'

'Oh, he says there is little to be done. He will send her some quieting medicine and a sleeping-draught for to-night. She is to rest as much as possible, and to avoid fatigue and late hours, and to take a little gentle exercise every day.'

'And what made him come so late?'

'Oh, he said Evans wanted him to see a bad case in the town—a stranger who had lately come to Draycott. It is a singular case of pressure on the brain. Besides other complications, he seems to have a fancy that some woman—his wife, I think he said—was poisoning him. Fergusson seems to think it is a case for a lunatic asylum, only he is evidently too ill to be moved.'

'Whom on earth are you talking about, Romney?' asked Oliver, who had just entered the room and had overheard the last words.

'Only a patient of Dr. Evans's—I think the name was Frith, or Smith—down in Church Street. The saddest part seems to be that there is quite a young daughter, a frightened nervous little creature, not a bit fit to attend such a case; but they are sending a nurse from the hospital.'

'Elsie, will you come out for a stroll?' asked Oliver abruptly; and the girl rose immediately. 'Oh, Oliver, I have wanted to speak to you so badly!' she exclaimed, as they descended the grass slope towards the lake, 'and I thought those stupid

people would never go. I wanted to tell you that I have seen him—Mrs. Romney s father. And what—what does it all mean?' facing round on the astonished young man.

Oliver uttered an exclamation. Then he drew her hand through his arm. 'There is no hurry,' he said coolly. 'We have two hours before us. I will row you out into the middle of the lake, and you shall tell me everything from the beginning.' And Elsie was soon in the midst of her narration. She had an excellent listener. Oliver never interrupted her by word or comment. Now and then his oar splashed idly in the water. But when she had finished, a look of relief came to his face.

'The secret is out,' he said quietly. 'Now there is no irritating mystery between us. Yes, poor Mr. Vincent is very ill. I was sitting up with him last night, so I ought to know.'

'But, Oliver——'

'Well, darling?'

'You must begin to talk now. I want to know the reason of all this secrecy. Why does Mrs. Romney keep her father's illness a secret from her husband?'

'I suppose the swans won't betray us if I take you into confidence. You have been a good child, Elsie, and you deserve your reward. Catherine cannot blame me if I tell you things now, as you know the main facts of the case. She has made a great mistake in keeping it dark from Romney. Romney is a generous fellow, and he would have

helped her to the best of his ability, and if I do not mistake she will pay dearly for her weakness.'

'Oh, Oliver, I hope not.'

'I hope so, too. But we Carfax men are a stiff-necked generation. We believe in sturdy old-fashioned honesty and straightforward plain ways. I love you dearly, Elsie, as you know well; and when you are my wife, I shall hope to love you a hundred times more. But if you disobeyed my express commands, and acted in opposition to my wishes without giving me warning that the pressure of circumstances obliged you to do so, I should consider that my confidence was betrayed, and that you were acting in an underhand way, and I fear—I very much fear—that you would forfeit my respect.'

'Oh no, Oliver! Pray do not tell me that there is any fear of Mrs. Romney losing her husband's respect.'

'No, dear, I will tell you nothing. I will just put the circumstances before you, and you shall judge for yourself. There is plenty of sense in that pretty little head. And, mind, although I blame Mrs. Romney, I am heartily sorry for her, too. She has had a hard life of it, poor woman!'

CHAPTER XIV

CATHERINE

'I am not fair, and therefore
I pray the gods make me honest.'
SHAKESPEARE.

OLIVER paused a moment, as though he were in doubt where to begin, and Elsie seized the opportunity to ask him another question.

'Just tell me one thing. How long have you been Mrs. Romney's confidant?' but Oliver shook his head at her reprovingly.

'That is so like a woman; the feminine mind always wants to know the end before the beginning. You must allow me to tell my story in my own way, or it will never be told at all.' And, thus rebuked, Elsie held her peace. Oliver could be masterful too when he chose; the Carfax brothers certainly possessed dominant wills.

'I told you how Romney and Catherine first met,' he went on, looking at her inquiringly, and Elsie nodded, 'and how my dearly-beloved brother took his own wilful way and disappointed his hosts by declining to fall in love with their handsome daughter, and how he courted the governess instead, but I have not told you that Catherine was hard to win.

'You know what a good-looking fellow Romney is; though I am his own brother, I declare I don't

know a man to compare with him; and he has a kindly, chivalrous way with women that wins their hearts. You may imagine his surprise and chagrin, then, at the quietly decided manner in which Catherine repelled his advances. He used to come to my diggings—you know the Firs was only three or four miles from Aldershot—looking quite down and miserable. I never saw a fellow so much in love in my life until I met a certain young person at a certain ball, and then I knew how it felt; but in spite of my want of experience I was very sorry for Romney.

'He used to drop into my favourite hammock-chair with a sigh that almost blew me away.

'"It is no use," he would say; "she keeps me at arm's length and avoids me as much as possible. She used to be quite friendly at first, but ever since I sent her those flowers she seems afraid to let me come near her; if I speak to her in the drawing-room of an evening she walks off to the piano and asks one of the boys to turn over her leaves for her; she will never let me do that for her if she can help it, ever since the night I told her that her voice haunted me."

'"You may depend upon it, it is pure cussedness," I would tell him. "Miss Vincent may be a very superior young woman; but I dare say she is not different from the rest of her sex. She is just trying it on a bit."

'"You are quite wrong," he returned warmly; "she has no nonsense of that sort, and—and, in

spite of her seeming coldness, I am convinced she is not as indifferent as she would have me believe;" and here Romney grew very red. "Once or twice I have seen her change colour when I have come upon her unexpectedly, and—well, you will know for yourself one day, old fellow, what these little things mean;" but I am afraid I laughed derisively at this.

'The next day he came he brought me an invitation from Mrs. Trafford. I was to dine and sleep at the Firs. They were very hospitable people, and there were other marriageable daughters besides Felicia.'

'Oh, Oliver! how can you be so wicked?'

'My dear little girl, I had had all my innocence knocked out of me early in life. I was quite a shy fellow until the young ladies taught me to flirt; and then, I own, I was an apt pupil. I had not quite completed my education in this respect, for I tried to back out, much to Romney's disgust.

'"You might think of me," he said reproachfully. "You are the only brother I have. I want you to see Miss Vincent and to give me your candid opinion how I stand with her. I cannot go on much longer in this way; it is making me quite thin. The Traffords, too, are beginning to be suspicious, and Felicia is growing cold. Could you not take her off my hands for one evening? I would do as much for you." And, as I found it impossible to refuse this touching request, I consented to be victimized, and packed my gladstone.

'I did not see Catherine until we were just going in to dinner; she had entered the room while Miss Angela Trafford was showing me the conservatory. Angela was a pretty, artless little girl, and I rather enjoyed the business.' But here there was an indignant remonstrance on Elsie's part.

'You are just saying that to tease me; but I know—I know,' with a triumphant tone in her voice, 'that you never flirted in your life; Mrs. Romney told me that. I don't care a bit if Angela were as pretty as she could be: I would trust you with a dozen Angelas.'

'Should you, darling? That is just what I wanted you to say. My bait had a nibble immediately. When we went back to the drawing-room I saw Romney speaking to a young lady in black. She was somewhat pale and unattractive-looking, and I never imagined for a moment it was Miss Vincent. Romney had praised her so enthusiastically that I failed to recognise his description; though she was certainly very graceful-looking. I was rather taken aback, then, when he said, somewhat eagerly, "Miss Vincent, this is my brother, Captain Carfax," in a voice that would have betrayed him to the most indifferent person. "I want you two to be good friends."

'I was bound to confess that this was somewhat cool on Romney's part, considering the small encouragement he had received; and I was not at all surprised that Miss Vincent bowed to me rather coldly. I saw then that she had fine eyes,

with a great deal of expression in them, and that her hands and arms were unusually beautiful.

'She sat beside me at dinner, but Angela Trafford was on my right hand, and I found no opportunity of speaking to her for some time. When I did so, I found her quite ready to converse with me. Her brief coldness had vanished, and she was full of animation. Before many minutes had passed I thought her charming; she was brimful of intelligence, and her manner was so unconscious and yet so sprightly that I began to understand Romney's infatuation.

'I did not mention his name for some time, and this was quite involuntary on my part, but a marked change came over her at once. She grew pale, and seemed to stiffen. I pretended not to notice this, but continued talking about him, and she became more syllabic and still more icy, and seemed almost glad when Mrs. Trafford gave the signal for the ladies to rise.

'When we returned to the drawing-room Catherine was singing. That beautiful voice drew me to the piano at once. Romney followed me, but after an instant he drew back and took up his station beside Felicia's chair. His attitude was somewhat moody; he seemed lost in thought. He was pulling his moustache in a perplexed, hopeless sort of a way—you know what I mean.

'The corner where I stood was a dark one, and I believe Catherine was unconscious of my presence. When she had finished her song she

turned over her music to find another; then I saw her suddenly pause and fix her eyes on Romney. I shall never forget her expression; if ever woman loved a man, Catherine loved Romney, I was convinced of that. Then I saw a distressed flush come to her face, her lip suddenly quivered, and she bent over her music again.

'I did not speak to her again that evening: neither did Romney. I think he purposely held aloof. When she finished singing, she played chess with Mr. Trafford until the men retired to the smoking-room.

'Romney came to my room late that night.

'"Well," he said abruptly, "what do you think of her? It was evident she liked you. I never saw her so animated."

'"I thought her very interesting," was my response. "She is not handsome, but somehow she impresses her individuality on you. Perhaps it is not too strong to say she has a charming personality."

'"My dear fellow!" and here Romney positively beamed, "I knew you would appreciate her; you are both so genuine. And now tell me if you think I have any chance with her?"

'"Go in and win," was my encouraging reply; "you shall have my congratulations beforehand"; and I sent him to bed radiant.

'The next morning I encountered Miss Vincent and her pupils in the garden. They were feeding their pets, and she was reading in the fernery.

She welcomed me with a smile, and I at once entered into conversation with her. She looked tired and a little sad, and there was a plaintiveness in her voice, but she surprised me very much by asking after Romney.

'"He did not seem in spirits last night. I don't think the place suits him. Why don't you advise him to have a thorough change?"

'She spoke impulsively, but she evidently meant what she said.

'"I am afraid I should have no influence with him, Miss Vincent; the Firs has too great an attraction for him."

'I suppose my manner was a little pointed. She blushed violently, and seemed agitated for a moment; then she summoned up her courage for another effort:

'"We have seen a great deal of Mr. Carfax lately. He has been very kind; I should think it is his nature to be kind. Mrs. Trafford is devoted to him; she is always asking him to stay. It is a pity the place does not suit him."

'"Why do you think it does not suit him? You may depend upon it, my brother would not come if it did not please him. Men are not so unselfish."

'"Oh, he is not selfish; no one is less so. I know him very well; we are good friends; that is why I think he needs a change. This sandy soil does not suit everybody; you should tell him so—please do," almost pleadingly; and I could see

then what beautiful eyes she had. In spite of the strangeness of her words, there was something so gentle and earnest in her expression that I could not turn them off with a laugh. I felt that she was appealing to me for help, that she had come to some crisis in her life when she wanted a friend.

'"I will tell him so, if you wish it, that you consider the place does not suit him, that you are sure he needs a change."

'"Yes, tell him that. He is very good-natured; he will not be angry. Thank you very much, Captain Carfax." She sighed, and then abruptly changed the subject by speaking of the book she held in her hand: "It is a good book; it helps me very much. It is sad, but there are such beautiful thoughts in it. The writer was too introspective and everything discouraged him, and in some sense his life was a failure, but, as the introduction so truly says, 'all thinkers are at home with him.'"

'I took the book from her hand. It was, as I guessed, the "Journal Intime" of Henry Frederick Amiel. I had seen reviews of it. I read out the first words that caught my eye: "We dream alone, we suffer alone, we die alone, we inhabit the last resting-place alone," and then I paused.

'"Oh, you have not finished the passage," she said, with quick animation. "Read what he says next: 'There is nothing to prevent us from opening our solitude to God.' Amiel speaks well there;

but, after all, is one in any sense alone? Even in our solitude we cannot strip ourselves of the thoughts, the memories, of others; we are still guided and governed by invisible monitors. Even in our loneliness the footsteps of our friends leave their mark everywhere." And when she had said this she closed the book and called the children to her. I found an opportunity to give Miss Vincent's message while they were hurrying my horse round to the stable. When Romney heard it a brightness came into his eyes.

'"Did she say that? I will speak to her to-night. She knows already that I love her, but to-night I will ask her to be my wife."

'"All right," was my response. After all, Romney was at liberty to choose his own wife. Mis Vincent was a gentlewoman—it was easy to see that—and what did her poverty matter? Romney had money enough for both. I had always been democratic in my views on social questions, and it did not in the least shock me that my future sister-in-law was a governess.

'There were some military manœuvres the next day, and it was late in the afternoon when I returned to my hut, heated and jaded. When I opened the door, I saw Romney extended in the hammock-chair, looking cool and comfortable. He jumped up and grasped my hand.

'"Wish me joy, lad!" he said excitedly. "Catherine is mine, after all; she has accepted me. But it was a hard tussle. You must drink

our health in some hock and seltzer-water. 'I have taken the liberty to give some orders in your absence."

'"I congratulate you heartily," was my reply, "but I refuse to hear another word until I have had my tub and got into some fresh garments;" and, though Romney grumbled, only my fox-terrier Wasp was the recipient of his growls. But when I returned refreshed and in excellent temper he took his revenge. Oh, ye gods, how he did talk! But my pipe consoled me. Dear as the charms of young love was that pipe to my soul! Well, Elsie'—another reproachful look—'have you not got reconciled to your all-powerful rival yet?'

'Oh, go on with your story!' she returned, in a vexed voice. 'I understand your jokes, and they do not in the least trouble me, but, all the same, you are incorrigible.'

'I have not half educated her yet, you see,' returned Oliver, apostrophizing the swans, 'but there is plenty of time. Tobacco certainly supported me that afternoon under the torrent of Romney's eloquence; and I do not mind confessing to you that I was a bit interested.

'Catherine had refused him at first, but with such tears and agitation that he had declined to take her answer, and had at last compelled her to acknowledge that she was far from indifferent to him.

'"But I must not—I ought not to marry you,"

she kept saying, and then at last it all came out. She loved him, but she was proud, and she could not endure that his people should consider her beneath him.

'"We are poor, dreadfully poor," she went on; and then, with the openness and candour that seemed natural to her, she told him about her life.

'It was rather a pitiful story. Her father was of good family, but he had been unfortunate. Nothing seemed to prosper with him. He had begun life as a barrister, but had never succeeded in holding a brief. Then he had taken pupils, and married a pretty, penniless girl, very gentle and amiable, but she had died when Catherine was about twelve years old, leaving her with a baby sister.

'During the fourteen years of his married life Mr. Vincent had tried many things, and failed in all. He had been journalist, reporter, a literary hack, and had hardly been able to keep his head above water. He had no want of brain, but he was deficient in ballast, and he lacked backbone. Even Catherine, who adored her father, owned that he was lamentably weak. "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel," might have been written of Stephen Vincent. And yet the man had influential friends. One of these educated Catherine, and at fourteen she was sent to a good finishing school at Brighton. The lady who was her benefactress died a few years afterwards, but while she lived Catherine never wanted a friend.

'At this time Mr. Vincent was doing some desultory literary work, and he and the child Eva were lodging at a house at Hendon, kept by a widow, a Mrs. Stewart. During her brief visits Catherine took a great dislike to this woman. She had beauty of a certain coarse type, and an easy good-natured manner that imposed on people; but Catherine, who was older than her years, was not deceived by Mrs. Stewart's plausible speeches, and she saw signs that warned her that she had a hard, sensual nature.

More than once she entreated her father to change his lodgings; but, in spite of his weakness, Mr. Vincent had an obstinate will. The place suited him, he said, and Eva throve under Mrs. Stewart's care. She was very good to them both, and he had never been more comfortable, and Catherine was obliged to yield the point; but if she had guessed the extent of her father's danger, she would never have left him.

'Alas! before two months were over, Mr. Vincent had taken the fatal step of making Mrs. Stewart his wife, and when it was too late, he found he had united himself for life to a coarse-minded and evil woman.

'With what arts she had beguiled him must be left to the imagination; but her object obtained, she almost at once threw off her disguise. When Catherine paid her next visit, she was almost heart-broken at the sight of her father's wretchedness. His wife had become a terror to him. She ruled

him with a rod of iron, and Eva was neglected, and even ill-treated.

"'She frightens me with her violence, Catherine,' he said. 'She is cruel to me and the child. She drinks, I know she drinks, and then she loses all control. You must stay and take care of us both.' But, alas! that was just what Catherine could not do. Her stepmother hated her, she knew that, and during those brief visits she had to put up with many an insult. The poor girl, with all her courage, was no match for her.

"'Why did you marry him if you meant to make him so wretched?' she exclaimed once, unable to bear the sight of her father's misery.

"'I had my own reasons, you may be sure of that,' returned the woman defiantly, 'or do you think I would have saddled myself with a poor creature like Vincent, and a brat of a child as well, who never had chicks of my own? Oh, I had my reasons, though I am not going to tell you them, miss. Perhaps I wished to marry a gentleman; perhaps I was tired of my own name and wanted to get rid of it. Anyhow, I have made a poor bargain of it. Why, your father hardly earns his own victuals. I am keeping him and the child. 'Write, why don't you write?' I say to him, when I bring him his pens and paper. 'It is brains you are wanting, I expect,' though he has the audacity to say that I prevent him from putting pen to paper!"

'Poor Catherine! She told Romney that every

farthing she could spare was spent in procuring little comforts for her father and Eva, and what she suffered on their account was known only to herself. When her education was finished she had obtained a good situation as a governess, and since then she has clothed Eva as well as herself. It was the thought of this miserable home, with the consciousness that her father and Eva depended upon her for all their comforts, that made her think that she had no right to marry; but Romney soon convinced her that this was sheer pride and morbidness, and he had at last gained her promise to become his wife.'

CHAPTER XV

WOMAN'S WEAKNESS

'By and by is easily said.'

AT this point Oliver took out his watch.

'I must hurry up, child, if I am to finish before dinner-time. You know all about Romney's brief courtship, and the Traffords' coolness, and how my mother never saw Catherine until she was Romney's wife.

'A little while before their marriage they went down to Hendon. He gave me an account of his visit afterwards.

'"Mr. Vincent is a gentleman," he said to me, "but he is utterly broken down and at his wife's

mercy. She is a loud-voiced, brazen-faced woman, and her tongue must be a terrible scourge. There is no doubt that she drinks, but she was sober enough on this occasion, and perfectly civil to Catherine and myself; but it made my blood boil to hear her sneering innuendoes over her husband's helplessness and shiftless ways. He hardly dared open his mouth, for fear of some retort, and the poor child Eva looked utterly cowed.

'"I did my best for them. I promised Mr. Vincent that he should receive an allowance from the date of our marriage, on the understanding that Eva should be sent to a good school, for really it was terrible to think of the poor child being left to the tender mercies of her stepmother, and certainly her father was no protector. But, to my surprise, Mr. Vincent objected to this arrangement. He could not part with the child, he said; they had never been separated. The very idea seemed to agitate him. But Mrs. Vincent interrupted him.

'"'I have no patience to hear you, Vincent!' she said rudely. 'I wonder you aren't ashamed to expose your weakness before strangers. Not part with Missy? And who do you suppose is going to educate her? He does not mean it, Mr. Carfax. He will come to his senses and thank you kindly for providing for the child, or I'll know the reason why,' she muttered.

'"'Father, it will be for Eva's good,' pleaded Catherine; and then at last he consented. 'She

is my only comfort,' he groaned, when his wife had left the room for a moment. 'I shall never be able to live without her! It is cruel to take her from me!' But for the child's sake we were obliged to be firm. He was only reaping the result of his own fatal weakness. Why should the innocent be sacrificed? He is selfish as well as weak," went on Romney. "I dare not tell Catherine so, for, with all his faults, she believes in him. But he is a man I could never respect.'

'For the first year after their marriage, things went on fairly well. The quarterly allowance was paid and acknowledged, and when they went to town, Catherine always saw her father; they had moved to Notting Hill then.

'Catherine always returned in low spirits from these visits; in her opinion things were becoming worse. Eva had not yet been sent to school, and only carried on a few desultory studies with her father's help, and even these had been discontinued of late. Catherine noticed a lamentable change in her father; a strange listlessness and lethargy seemed creeping over him, as though some numbing influence were clouding his faculties. At times he was excited and irritable, and his fear of his wife seemed to have increased to a nervous dread.

'"I dare not thwart her," he said. "If I do, she visits it on Eva; she makes me suffer through the child. The spirits madden her, and then I am in terror of my life. I am always afraid of something dreadful happening. I dare not trust Eva

out of my sight; it is she who will not let her go to school. She says we want the money; but she keeps it all." Catherine used to carry home sorrowful tales to Romney, but he once told me in confidence that he distrusted Mr. Vincent. "He has not a straightforward look about him; you know what I mean. I dare say circumstances are too hard for him, poor beggar! one ought not to judge him harshly. That woman is his master. Don't you wish, Oliver, that we could lock up such creatures? they are the plague and pestilence of our civilized life; and, upon my word, it is a form of madness."

'One day I went down to Frythe unexpectedly, and found Catherine in terrible trouble. Romney's banker had sent for him. A cheque for a large amount, payable to Stephen Vincent, had been detained; the cheque was genuine and in Romney's handwriting, but the figures had been evidently altered, but so clumsily that suspicion had been excited. "We did not like the look of the affair," observed the cashier: "the young lady who brought it could give no information, so we thought it best to send for you, Mr. Carfax, as the ordinary quarterly amount was more than quadrupled."

'Romney thanked them, and explained that someone had certainly been tampering with the cheque, but that he had no wish to convict the offender. He would settle the matter in his own way; and, without returning home, he went at once to Notting Hill.

'"It was an abominable business," he said to me afterwards; "it sickens me to think of it. That woman was in the room, and refused to leave me alone with her husband. When I threw the cheque on the table I saw Mr. Vincent turn ashy pale and throw up his hands. 'If one of us has to be sent to prison, it ought to be my wife,' he cried. 'It was she who tempted me to do it, who stood looking over my shoulder all the time. I have been an honest man all my life, in spite of my misfortunes; and she has been my curse!' And the poor wretch burst into tears."

'Catherine was almost beside herself when she told me what had happened. "My poor, poor father," she sobbed, "who was the soul of honour, and never owed a penny even in his worst straits! I do not believe that he did it; or, if he did, he was not himself. I have told Romney more than once that I am sure that his intellect is becoming clouded with misery; but he does not believe me. He thinks that he has done this thing. And now he has forbidden me to go near him; he says it is not safe for us to have dealings with them. The allowance is to be paid in a different way. For my sake he will not discontinue it; but he says it is only on the understanding that I will never have anything more to do with them during that woman's lifetime."

'"And Eva?"

'"He has promised that all possible efforts shall be made to withdraw Eva from her stepmother.

Oh, he was very kind; he said my visits did more harm than good—that Mrs. Vincent merely traded upon us, and that, even if I differed from him in opinion, I owed him a wife's obedience, and that he had every right on his side;" and of course I took Romney's part.

'Romney was perfectly open with me.

'"It is spoiling Catherine's life," he said; "they give her no peace between them. To satisfy her, I make the old man a sufficient allowance. I can and will do no more. She can write to them, but I will not allow her to enter that woman's house."

'I heard nothing more for eighteen months or so. Harry was born, and Catherine remained in a delicate state for some time. She wrote to her father from time to time, but he seldom answered; but Eva wrote pathetic little letters, which were always shown to Romney.

'Three months ago I had come down here for a flying visit. Romney had been suddenly called up to London to attend a friend's funeral, and meant to sleep two or three nights in town. I thought Catherine in wonderfully good spirits, considering his absence; and we had a very pleasant evening. I remember I had just been to a certain ball, and what must Catherine do but pounce upon my secret? "You have fallen in love, you naughty boy," she said, immediately she saw me: "you are not a bit yourself. Now tell me all about her." And—would you believe it, Elsie?—I was fool

enough to fall into the trap. I do not know which of us enjoyed ourselves most; for Catherine is like you—she dearly loves a love-story. But my pleasure was not of long continuance. The very next day a note was brought to Catherine that seemed to agitate her; she said nothing at the time, but a little while afterwards she told me that she had business that would oblige her to go to Draycott.

'I offered to drive her there, but she hesitated visibly; when I persisted, she begged me to set her down at that big draper's—Wilcox's, isn't it? —telling me that she would meet me in the market-place at twelve o'clock; but I waited for her a full hour before she joined me. She had her veil down, but I noticed at once that her eyes were red and swollen, as though she had been crying; but it was impossible to question her, as Reynolds would have overheard every word; so I talked to her on indifferent subjects, and she answered me at random.

'She did not appear at luncheon, and my mother told me that she had a bad headache and was lying down. But she had recovered herself by dinner-time, and, though she looked wretchedly ill, she made an effort to talk as usual.

'I intended to find out the reason of this sudden fit of depression; but I bided my time until my mother had left us, and then I questioned her very closely. Her answers were decidedly evasive, and more than once she contradicted herself; but

I persevered, and her agitation increased, and at last she burst into tears and told me everything. Her father and Eva were in Draycott. Mr. Vincent, driven to desperation by the misery of his home, had formed the singular resolution of escaping from his wife and putting himself and Eva under Catherine's protection. He had taken a few sovereigns out of his wife's purse while she lay in one of her heavy stupors, and Eva had willingly accompanied him. Her stepmother's evil tempers made the poor girl's life a perfect torment to her, and in her innocence and inexperience she thought that Catherine would approve of this step.

'A pencilled note sent by hand informed Catherine that they were at the Temperance Hotel in Cannon Street, and on her arrival she found, to her dismay, that these two helpless creatures were looking to her as their sole refuge. The pitiful story that Eva told her nearly broke her heart, and the girl's thin, wan looks alarmed her. She had evidently outgrown her strength; and her education was almost wholly neglected. Latterly they had kept no servant, and Eva's rough and coarsened hands told their own tale.

'But Catherine's chief fear was for her father; he was evidently out of health, and the signs of clouded intellect were clearly apparent. He seemed to have a fixed idea that his wife meant to compass his and Eva's death, and he declared no power on earth would induce him to return to

her; and Eva assured her sister that all persuasions and arguments would be fruitless.

'Catherine was at her wits' end; and then she remembered a tidy, hard-working woman whose child she had once befriended, and who let lodgings in Church Street. Mrs. Tilsit was a kind-hearted person, and thoroughly honest. She would represent the case to her, only keeping back the fact that Mr. Vincent was her father; and she thought if she changed the name to Smith it would be safer on all accounts.

'She started at once for Church Street, and, to her relief, found that the rooms were unoccupied. Mrs. Tilsit expressed herself perfectly willing to care for the poor gentleman, and the moderate sum she named was quite within Catherine's means.

'Mr. Vincent—or, rather, Mr. Smith, as he consented to call himself—seemed quite satisfied with the look of the rooms. They were small, and the furniture humble, but they were exquisitely clean; and Eva took a great fancy to the buxom, cheerful-looking landlady.

'"I will make the old gentleman as comfortable as comfortable. Don't say another word, Mrs. Carfax; it is enough for me that they are friends of yours. Don't I remember all your kindness to Johnnie when he had his leg cut off in the hospital! Ah, well! the dear lamb is better off, isn't he? though I do crave sadly after him still.' And the good woman wiped her eyes gently with her apron.

'Catherine had left them looking fairly cheerful, but you may imagine the feelings with which I listened to her. I had promised to keep her confidence, little thinking what she had to tell me.

'My first words were to entreat her to write to Romney, or to tell him immediately on his return. I understood her to say that she intended to do so, and this at once relieved me.

'I left the next day, and you know what happened then, darling. Was it any wonder that my own affairs so entirely absorbed me that I scarcely remembered Mr. Vincent's existence? Now and then a feeling of surprise crossed me that Catherine did not write. When her letter came, it was full of sisterly congratulation on my engagement, but she never mentioned her father.

'You remember I went down from Friday to Monday, as my mother wished to see me. I found Catherine apparently cheerful, but it struck me once or twice that she avoided being alone with me. This excited my suspicion, and I determined to watch my opportunity.

'As we were walking home from church together—Romney was in front with Mrs. Vickars—Catherine was telling me an anecdote about Harry, but I interrupted her.

'"I will hear that presently. I want to know why you have not written to me, Catherine. Was Romney vexed when he heard your father was in Draycott?' But at this question she turned pale and hung her head.

'"He does not know yet," she faltered. "Oh, Oliver, don't look at me in that way, as though you blamed me! I have tried a dozen times to tell him, and I cannot—I dare not! Oh, I am a pitiful coward! But I dare not make him angry."

'"Why do you suppose he would be angry?" I replied. "You are very wrong, Catherine. I never thought you could be so weak. Do you mean to tell me that for six weeks you have kept this secret from your husband?"

'"Yes, and it is killing me. I suffer—oh, what I suffer! But I dare not tell him. When I try my lips seem glued together. What would he say if he knew I had disobeyed and deceived him?"

'"Of course, he would be angry; but at least you can be sure of his forgiveness;" but Catherine shook her head.

'"He would never trust me again; and yet, what am I to do, Oliver?" wringing her hands. "My father is dying; it is only a question of weeks —Dr. Evans says so. His brain is affected, and at times he suffers terribly."

'"Do you think that Romney would be hard on a dying man? What has become of your good sense, Catherine? If you had trusted your husband six weeks ago, you would have had no reason to dread his anger. Why did you not write to him, as I bade you? Why did you not say to him, 'I have disobeyed you; my father

is at Draycott, and I am taking care of him'? Do you suppose Romney would have been hard on you?"

'"Oh, I was wrong—very wrong," she sobbed, "but you do not understand. Where Romney is concerned I am a coward. I see my mistake as plainly as you do; but you must not think it was intentional. Every day I meant to tell Romney. I have tried to do so over and over again, but my courage failed. 'I will tell him to-morrow; I shall be stronger to-morrow'—that is what I would say to myself."

'"But, Catherine, this is sheer madness. Romney will find it out for himself the next time the allowance is paid."

'"It has been paid," she returned quickly. "Mrs. Vincent signed the receipt; she said her husband was ill in bed. She did not wish Romney to know that he had left her."

'"Did Romney tell you this?"

'"Yes. Oh, don't look at me so sternly, Oliver: I really was beginning to tell him then, only Lady Carfax came into the room, and Romney changed the subject."

'"There is one other thing, Catherine. Are you not afraid that Romney will come face to face with Eva?"

'"He has done so, but he has not recognised her. Eva was a child when he saw her last. There is no danger of that sort: my father is confined to his room."

'"Shall I tell Romney for you?" But she negatived this with great agitation.

'"No; I will tell him myself. I will—indeed I will. I will humble myself to him and ask his pardon, and then—oh yes, he will be good to me."

'"Come, that is spoken like yourself, Catherine."

'And then Romney turned back to meet us, and we could say no more. When I went away the next morning, she told me of her own accord that she meant to speak to Romney that night, but she would not promise to write to me. She said such a letter would be very painful, and that when I brought you down to the Frythe she would tell me all about it.

'You can understand, Elsie, my disgust and disappointment on that first evening when I left you so long alone, when Catherine informed me that Romney was still in ignorance, and that, as her father could not last many days, she should not tell him until all was over. I was very angry, and accused her of purposely breaking her promise to me; but she assured me with tears that she fully meant to keep her word, but that her courage always failed.

'"You cannot feel the contempt I feel for myself!" she exclaimed bitterly. "I loathe myself for my cowardice. Oh, you were right, Oliver. If I had told Romney at once he would have helped me; but now I cannot, I dare not. He would put my father in a lunatic asylum. He is

not sane, I know, but he is so weak, and he cannot live."

'I tried to reason her out of this idea, but this morbid fancy had taken possession of her, and she said Eva had the same terror. Romney was always praising up the Draycott asylum, and saying what a skilful and clever doctor managed it, and how admirably everything was arranged.

'"Dr. Evans proposed it, too," she went on. "He said he would have every comfort there, and the best of nursing; but, Oliver, I want him to die in peace. If Mrs. Tilsit cannot manage, I will get a nurse. He shall have everything that I can give him."

'I asked her if he was violent, and she said very seldom, and that he was growing weaker. When I questioned her about money arrangements, she hesitated, and then confessed that she had recently parted with a handsome bracelet that Sir Henry had given her, and she thankfully accepted my offer to help her.

'You can guess the rest for yourself, Elsie. You know now why I spent the night out. Mrs. Tilsit was worn out, and needed help. Catherine still obstinately refuses to tell Romney until her father's death, and then she means to plead with him for Eva. She wants her to live at the Frythe. I do not wish you to be too hard on Catherine, though I own I have lost patience with her. Listen, dear. Is not that the gong? I must put you ashore at once. And, for pity's sake,

don't look so miserable, or my mother will think we have quarrelled.' But, though Elsie laughed hysterically at this idea, her eyes were wet. 'Poor Mrs. Romney!' she sighed as she crossed the lawn. 'But how can anyone act so foolishly?'

CHAPTER XVI

ELSIE'S DILEMMA

'I give him joy that's awkward at a lie.'
YOUNG.

OLIVER'S narrative made a painful impression on Elsie, which she found it impossible to shake off.

She was perplexed by this sudden revelation of weakness. That a woman so naturally frank and upright as Catherine Carfax should indulge in morbid fears and moral cowardice would have puzzled a wiser and older head. And yet who could blame her? Was it not the strength and piety of her filial love that made the idolizing wife stoop to deceive her husband? Granted that her fears were groundless, and that she had no real cause to dread Romney's treatment of her father, yet was there no nobility, however mistaken, in that secret watching beside a dying bed, in those stolen interviews when she was as a ministering angel to him and Eva?

'Let him die in peace,' was her inward cry. 'What will anything matter afterwards? Let me

close his eyes, and then—then Romney shall learn everything.'

When Elsie entered the drawing-room, she was surprised to see Mrs. Romney lying on the couch by the open window, talking to her mother-in-law. She greeted Elsie with a faint smile, and held out a hot hand to her. 'I am in the hands of the Philistines,' she said, with an attempt at playfulness. 'Dr. Fergusson and Romney are as disagreeable as possible, and are determined to treat me as an invalid; but I mean to fight for my freedom.'

'You are the worst patient I ever knew,' returned Romney, who seemed to have recovered his spirits. 'Is she not a bit of quicksilver, mother?' And Lady Carfax gave an assenting smile.

'Are you not coming to dinner?' asked Elsie, as the Squire offered his arm to his mother, and Catherine did not rise.

'No. My lord and master has decided that I am to remain here,' replied Mrs. Romney; but there was a vexed chord in her voice. 'Go in with Oliver, my dear. All men are tyrants. You will find that out for yourself some day.'

But Romney only shook his head indulgently at this rebellious speech. 'She is as weak and shaky as possible,' he observed, *sotto voce*. 'She is only fit to lie there. Elsie, I think I shall make you head-nurse to-morrow. You will have to carry out my orders most stringently.'

'Is to-morrow your day at Winton?' asked Oliver.

'Yes. I have to see Hudson about the short-horns. I think I shall take the ten-fifty train. That will give me plenty of time.'

'And you will come by the five-thirty as usual?'

'Yes. I could not possibly catch the two-forty-five, and there is no other train. So mind, Elsie, I leave you in charge. Catherine is to go no farther than the garden. If she wants a walk, I will take her myself when I return. She exposes herself too much to the sun. A stroll between six and seven will do her far more good. And don't let Harry tire her. She is to have entire rest for a few days. Those are Fergusson's orders.'

'I will do my best,' returned Elsie, rather nervously; but her heart sank a little at the task imposed upon her. Supposing Mrs. Romney chose to be contumacious? But at least Oliver would help her; but, to her dismay, she heard him say the next minute that he meant to accompany his brother, a proposition that seemed to please the Squire.

'You are sure you will take that train back?' he asked, a little anxiously.

'Quite sure, my dear fellow. Have you any idea of the heaps of business I have to transact? Why, I have not been over to Winton for the last three months.' And so the matter was settled.

When dinner was over, Elsie found herself alone with Mrs. Romney for ten minutes.

'Have you had your orders, Elsie?' asked Catherine in a queer voice as the girl came up to her; and Elsie nodded assent.

'Ah, I thought so'—leaning back a little wearily on her cushions. 'I have had mine, too. Let me see,' checking the items off on her fingers—'breakfast in bed, a thing I hate; but we will let that pass. Poor Romney! He means well; Harry for half an hour, but no longer; a stroll in the garden; a nap after luncheon—can naps be furnished to order, Elsie?—and very weak tea, a decoction I loathe. There, I have forgotten the rest.'

'I hope you mean to be good, or you will get me into trouble.' But Mrs. Romney made no answer to this, and directly her husband came into the room she pleaded fatigue and retired.

'I wish you were not going to Winton,' observed Elsie rather wistfully, as she and Oliver wandered about in the summer twilight. 'You are always leaving me now.'

'I proposed it, dear, because Romney thinks I neglect him. He does so dearly love a companion. If Catherine had been stronger she would have gone with him, but she certainly does not look fit for much. I don't think you will have much trouble with her, Elsie, for she will not dare to take out the horses, as it would reach Romney's ears.'

'Then she will not want to go to Draycott?' returned Elsie, brightening up visibly at this.

'I dare say that in her heart she will be longing to go, but she knows Reynolds would tell his master that the horses had been out, as mother wants them in the afternoon. No, no; set your mind at rest. There will be no drive to Draycott.' And Elsie was much relieved to hear this.

'Be a good girl, Elsie, and take care of Catherine,' were Romney's parting words, as he and Oliver drove off from the door. From an upper window the hand that Romney thought the fairest in the world waved him a farewell.

Elsie stood on the steps watching them. Her eyes rested a little wistfully on the brothers; their expression was soft and dreamy. The young fair-haired officer, with his grave face and quiet ways, had taken possession of her and her life. Did Elsie any longer regret her lost freedom? did her bonds continue to gall her? The sweet, smiling brightness of her face contradicted such a notion. 'Loyal and true, true and loyal,' was the Vaughan motto.

A peal of baby laughter roused her from her abstraction, and soon she and Harry were pelting each other with daisies on the lawn. Now and then Catherine stood by her window to watch them; the limp, crushed flowers in the little fat hand, the joy with which each frail blossom was hurled at his play-fellow, the exulting shout when one reached her, formed a lovely sight to the mother's heart.

Elsie had forgotten all about her charge. Harry

was clamouring to see the water-fowl, and she carried him herself to the lake, whilst his nurse went back to the house to fetch some needlework. Directly she returned, Elsie put down the stuttering, remonstrating boy and bade him pick some more daisies, and then she went in search of Mrs. Romney.

'She must be dressed by this time,' thought she, 'and I shall coax her down to the shady seat by the water;' but as she knocked briskly at the door of Catherine's room, no answering voice bade her enter. The room was in disorder, and Eliza, the deaf housemaid, was making the bed. Elsie ran downstairs again; but the drawing-room and the library were empty, and the white Persian cat was the sole tenant of the morning-room. In the hall she encountered Emma, the under-housemaid. 'Is Mrs. Romney in the east wing?' she asked.

'No ma'am; she has gone out,' returned the girl, 'and she asked me to give you this note, as she would not be back to luncheon.'

Elsie suppressed an exclamation with difficulty.

'Gone out? Are you sure, Emma?' she asked, as she took the note.

'Oh yes, ma'am; she left the house ten minutes ago, when you and Master Baby were down by the lake. She went down the shrubbery path, and let herself out by the green gate.'

Elsie made no answer, and as soon as Emma was out of sight she tore open the note. It only contained a few sentences:

'Forgive me, Elsie dear, for giving you the slip, but it was the best thing to do. I am going to Draycott by train; there is only a mile to walk, and I shall take the four-fifteen train back; that will bring me home long before Romney returns from Winton. Put Gran off the scent; but it is just possible that she will have luncheon with Sir Henry. Adieu. Do not be vexed with me, little one.'

Elsie could have sat down and cried hot tears of indignation and alarm. Was Mrs. Romney mad, to walk to the station in this broiling heat—for it was a sultry, airless morning—and in her weak state, too? She meant to be absent for hours; she would time herself to arrive just before her husband's train was due. 'Oh, it is madness, sheer madness!' raged Elsie. 'What am I to do if Lady Carfax questions me? I have never told a lie in my life, and I never will. She has gone to Draycott by train—can I say anything else? and it will all come out before the Squire. Oh, if only Oliver had not gone! I had a misgiving last night, but he only laughed at me; he said she would never dare to go to Draycott.'

Elsie was working herself up to fresh indignation, when Lady Carfax's voice sounded from the east wing. The window of her sitting-room opened on the terrace where Elsie was standing.

'Elsie, my dear.' And Elsie slipped the note into her pocket, and hurried to the window.

'I am sorry to trouble you, my love,' explained Lady Carfax, with her old-fashioned courtesy,

'but will you kindly give Catherine a message? The Turners have just sent me a note to ask me to go up to the Rowans to luncheon, and they will drive me in to Draycott; so I have told Reynolds that I shall not want the horses after all. Will you kindly tell Catherine this, as I am somewhat pressed for time?'

'Are you going there at once?' asked Elsie, with nervous anxiety; but Lady Carfax was too short-sighted to notice the girl's expression.

'As soon as I have finished reading the paper to Sir Henry. Will you come in and see him, my dear?'

But Elsie made a lame excuse and hurried away; she would go down to the lake and hide herself until Lady Carfax was safely off the premises, and then there would be no awkward questions. 'It is not right of Mrs. Romney to put me in such a painful position,' she thought, with another wave of indignation: 'she sacrifices every one—Oliver and me and her own husband—to this horrible mystery. I feel I can bear no more. I shall ask Oliver to let me go back to Banksland.' And with this resolution Elsie opened her book.

Presently Emma came in search of her to tell her that luncheon was ready.

'No one seemed to know where to find you, ma'am,' she explained, 'but I saw you from an upper window. I think Roberts has gone to the east wing.'

'And Lady Carfax has gone out?'

'Oh yes, an hour ago; she left her love, and hoped Mrs. Romney felt brighter, and that she would eat a good luncheon.'

'But you told her that Mrs. Romney was out?'

'Oh yes, ma'am, but she was in too great a hurry to hear me, for she only said, "Give my love to her, and tell her I shall be home by six."'

'What a piece of good luck, the Turners sending that invitation!' thought Elsie, as she sat down to her solitary meal. Roberts was very attentive to her, though he was evidently perplexed by the absence of his young mistress, and Elsie, feeling somewhat relieved, made an excellent meal.

Her spirits were beginning to rise. After all, things were not so bad as she imagined. It was nearly half-past two, and in another two hours Mrs. Romney would be at Fordham; she would reach home nearly an hour before the Squire could put in an appearance. Elsie began to feel as though enjoyment were possible. She smoothed her hair, and, fetching her embroidery, seated herself in the veranda. She had made up her mind to be at Fordham Station in time to meet the train, so that Mrs. Romney should not have a long, lonely walk.

Elsie's thoughts began to stray happily to the future, and to the Indian bungalow that awaited her. She was trying to recall what a friend of hers had told her about Indian life and its

pleasures, when she heard the green door in the shrubbery shut, and a moment afterwards quick footsteps crunching the gravel.

'She has come back earlier than she expected,' thought the girl joyfully, as she sprang up from her chair. 'It cannot be half-past three yet.' But Elsie's bright look of expectation changed to absolute dismay as the Squire's tall figure emerged from the shrubbery.

Elsie would have turned and fled, but he had seen her, and waved his hand gaily. He had walked fast, and looked hot and tired, and he flung himself down in a hammock-seat in the cool veranda with a sigh of relief. 'Upon my word, it is the hottest day we have had this year, and there has not been a yard of shade the whole way. How delightfully cool and comfortable you look!'

'Where is Oliver?' faltered Elsie, who felt anything but cool that moment.

'Oh, Spiers got hold of him and carried him off to luncheon at the Hall. He will come by the next train. I got through all my business quicker than I expected; so I thought I might as well come home. Is Catherine lying down?'

'No'—rather faintly. 'Oh, how tired you look! Shall Roberts bring you anything? Would you like tea earlier?'

'If he would bring me some hock and seltzer I should be deeply grateful. No, nonsense! Where are you going, Elsie? Do you think I am too far

gone to ring the dining-room bell and give my orders?' But Elsie turned a deaf ear to this. She would ring for Roberts and make her escape.

She looked at the clock as she passed it. Twenty minutes to four. Nearly another hour before Mrs. Romney's train was due at Fordham!

'I will not go near him,' she said to herself, as she locked herself into her room. 'He will think me unkind and neglectful, but it is the only course to pursue.' But a few minutes later there was a knock at her door.

It was Emma, with a disturbed look on her rosy face.

'If you please, ma'am, will you go down to master, Roberts says. He wants to speak to you a moment.'

'Very well, Emma,' was the reply. But poor Elsie was some minutes before she could summon up her courage to face the Squire.

He was still in the veranda, and had evidently had his refreshment, but he looked decidedly put out.

'What a time you have been!' he said, a little irritably. 'Why did you go away, Elsie? I wanted to talk to you. What is this Roberts tells me—that Catherine is out? Surely she and you could not have misunderstood my orders. Out in this sun! Roberts says that, to the best of his belief, she has been out most of the day.' And there was an ominous frown on the Squire's face.

'It is not my fault,' began Elsie, rather lamely, but he interrupted her.

'When did she leave the house?'

'I do not know—not the exact time, I mean. I was playing with Harry down by the lake, and when I looked for her, Emma told me that she had gone out.'

'And have you no idea of the time?'

'It was before eleven. I was going back to the house to tell her how cool and shady it was by the water, and I was very troubled when I could not find her.'

'Did she leave no message? Good heavens, Elsie! she must surely have told someone where she was going.'

'She left a note to say that she was going to Draycott by train, and would be back by the four-thirty train.'

An alarmed look came into the Squire's face. 'Do you mean to tell me that she walked to Fordham Station?'

'Oh yes, she walked,' returned Elsie, wishing with all her heart that she were anywhere else. 'She thought Lady Carfax wanted the horses, but the Turners are driving her in to Draycott. I know she means to walk back.'

'We shall see about that,' returned Mr. Carfax abruptly; and he rang the drawing-room bell with a peal that brought Roberts without delay.

CHAPTER XVII

ROMNEY

'I will instruct my sorrow to be proud.'
King John.

'TELL Reynolds to put the mare into the victoria and to meet the four-thirty train at Fordham.'

'It is ten minutes past four now, sir,' replied Roberts respectfully; 'by the stable clock it is near the quarter.'

'Tell him to drive fast and overtake me,' was the curt answer. 'He is to look sharp about it, mind.' And the Squire took up his straw hat.

'Let me go with you,' pleaded Elsie, terrified at the sternness of his manner. In spite of his easy good-nature, the Squire was never disobeyed with impunity.

'I must go with you,' she continued, as he shook his head. 'I see you are angry with us both, and I must explain things. Poor Mrs. Romney! oh, I know she cannot help herself!'

'Get your hat, then,' was his curt reply. Romney was not quite pleased with Elsie; he fancied that her answer had been evasive, and if there was one thing that the Squire detested with all his honest heart, it was want of straightforwardness. If she were free from blame, why had she left him, and why did she seem so nervous

when he questioned her about Catherine's movements? There was something beneath all this, and he meant to get to the bottom of it.

And Catherine—his own Kitty—had disobeyed him! Too well he remembered all those tender injunctions of his, how he had begged her as a favour to him not to exert herself in any way, and she had smiled in his face as she answered him. 'You foolish, tiresome old man!' she had called him.

Not exert herself; and she had walked in this sun, not an inch of shade anywhere, and had spent the whole day at Draycott! 'It is enough to try a saint's patience!' he thought angrily. No wonder Elsie looked at him with wide, frightened eyes as they walked down the shrubbery path together; but he kept silence until they were in the road.

'Well,' he observed abruptly, as he tried to adapt his long strides to his companion's tripping steps—'well, Elsie, what is this that you have to tell me?'

'I want to tell you why Mrs. Romney is so ill,' she replied, in a breathless voice. 'I have only just found it out for myself. It is because she is keeping something from you, and it makes her dreadfully unhappy. You and Dr. Fergusson think she is ill; but no, it is only fretting because she feels she is deceiving you.'

'Do you know what you are saying?' returned Romney; and then he actually laughed.

'Catherine deceive me! Why, the idea is utterly absurd!'

'She could not help herself. That is why I am telling you, because it is no use her trying to hide it any longer. She has bound Oliver to secrecy, but she has not bound me, and I have never told a lie in my life, and I never will; and I want to help her, because she is so good, and I love her.'

'Bound Oliver to secrecy?' Romney began to feel a little giddy. What did the girl mean? Why did she not speak out? Of course, his Kitty was good—everyone knew that; but, all the same, she had disobeyed him to-day.

'When you know all about it, you will not blame her in the least,' went on Elsie in the same breathless way. 'You will be far too sorry for her. No one can help loving one's own father, especially when he is old and dying and broken-hearted.' But here Romney laid a strong hand on the girl's slight shoulder.

'She has gone to see her father? What do you mean by this prevarication, Elsie? Just now when we were in the house you told me that Catherine had gone to Draycott.'

'It is no prevarication,' returned Elsie indignantly. 'You will make me angry with you if you say that. Mr. Vincent is at Draycott. He is hiding there from his wicked wife, and Eva is with him, and he is dying, and his poor brain is confused, and that is why Mrs. Romney has gone to him.'

The Squire's hand dropped from her shoulder.

'Tell me all you know about this business,' he said sternly. 'I was wrong in accusing you of prevarication. You are a good little soul, Elsie; but I think I am stupid with all this heat, for I do not seem to follow you. Mr. Vincent is at Draycott, you say, and the child Eva, and Catherine is with them, and Oliver, not her husband, is in her confidence?'

'Oh, I will explain that.' And to the best of her ability Elsie did explain it, but it may be doubted how much the Squire understood.

The shock that staggered him was that Catherine had deceived him, that she had not ventured to trust her husband. For weeks, for months, she had kept this secret from him—from him who had never concealed a thought from her. She had deceived him for his own good, of course, but, still, she had deceived him.

'And Oliver was in her confidence!' He repeated this aloud, to Elsie's dismay.

'It was not Oliver's fault. Mr. Carfax, you do not understand. It has made Oliver so wretched; he hated the whole thing. He kept begging her to tell you everything, but she was afraid.'

'Oh, she was afraid!' And the Squire laughed again, only it was not a pleasant laugh to hear. He began to think that he was dreaming, that Elsie must be talking to someone else. Kitty afraid of him! What a droll idea! Untrue, too, on the face of it.

'There is Mrs. Romney coming towards us!' exclaimed Elsie suddenly. 'Oh, how wan and ill she looks! Dear Mr. Carfax, do be good to her.' But Romney turned impatiently from her. Would the girl never cease her chattering? And yet Elsie had done her poor little best, and bravely too. With her ready girlish fingers she had cut the Gordian knot. 'What was the use of deceiving him any more?' she said to Oliver afterwards. 'It was the safest plan to tell him everything, only I made such a muddle of it.'

The Squire stopped short when he saw his wife, but Catherine did not at first perceive them. She was walking in rather an unsteady way, her dress trailing in the dust behind her, and a dazed, far-off look in her eyes. She would have passed them in that strange abstraction, but Romney's voice arrested her. 'Catherine!' Never had he said that beloved name in such a tone.

She started violently, and the blood ebbed away from her face with the sudden surprise.

'I did not see you. Have you come to meet me, you and Elsie?' Then, as she saw his face more clearly: 'Oh, Romney, do not be angry with me! I know I have disobeyed you, but, indeed, indeed——'

'I have told him everything,' whispered Elsie. 'It was the only thing to do.'

'Yes, I know everything,' replied her husband, with forced calm. 'There is the victoria coming. We may as well go back and meet it.' And he

was turning away, but Catherine caught him by the arm.

'No, not everything, Romney,' in a voice that was agonized and yet triumphant. 'He is at rest; my poor father is at rest. He will never know sorrow and pain again. Listen to me, dear. By-and-by I will ask you to forgive me for my cowardice and deceit, but this moment I can only think of him. He died in my arms an hour ago. Died? Nay, he slept away like a little child, and I kissed his dear eyes, and thanked God. Romney!' in a voice of despair. 'Oh, he is not listening to me, and I am tired—so tired! And, to Elsie's alarm, she swayed forward, and Romney caught her in his arms.

Poor Catherine! That dark irresponsive look on Romney's face was the last drop in her cup of sorrow. Worn out by heat, fatigue, her own weakness, and the tension of the last few hours, nothing could be more natural than that long fainting-fit, which alarmed Elsie nearly out of her senses, and drove Romney to desperation.

He lifted her into the carriage, and supported her himself, and the moment they reached the house Reynolds was sent off to fetch Dr. Fergusson. Consciousness soon returned, however, and in a little while she was able to thank Elsie for her kindly attentions.

'Where is Romney?' she whispered faintly, as Elsie kissed her and hoped she was better.

'He has shut himself up in the library, and

Dr. Fergusson is to go to him there, and he has asked for Oliver. He only left the room just now; he waited until he heard you speak.' But this evidently failed to give Catherine any comfort, for she closed her eyes with a deep sigh.

'He cannot trust himself to speak to me,' she thought, and the slow tears of utter weakness rolled down her face. 'He is angry with me, or he would not have left me.'

Elsie read her thoughts. 'He has only just left the room,' she said soothingly. 'I dare say he will be back directly. He was dreadfully anxious: he would not let anyone but himself carry you upstairs, and he looked so white and frightened that I felt quite sorry for him.'

But Catherine made no reply to this. Some old refrain was ringing in her ears with dizzy persistence, 'And to be wroth with one we love' —how did it go on?—'to be wroth'—'to be wroth,' beat like tiny hammers in her brain, but it was some time before the next line occurred to her.

'Oh, I have got it!' she said presently, to Elsie's alarm, for she thought Mrs. Romney was delirious: '"And to be wroth with one we love doth work like madness on the brain"; but my Romney—God bless him!—is not mad.'

When Dr. Fergusson had paid his visit, he went down to the library with rather a grave face. Oliver had just come in, and was talking to his brother. Romney listened gloomily to the doctor's opinion.

'A medical man has sharp eyes,' Dr. Fergusson said presently. 'Mrs. Carfax is evidently suffering from some painful shock. I told you yesterday that her nerves were overstrained, and now I must repeat my orders—perfect quiet and no agitated discussion: body and mind must have entire rest, or I will not answer for the consequences. The quieter you keep her the better.'

'You heard what Fergusson said?' observed Romney dryly, when the doctor left them. 'If Catherine escapes a nervous illness I shall be much surprised. What is the use of your telling me to go up to her?' he continued irritably, when some further conversation had passed between them; 'it will only excite Catherine, and do no good.'

'My dear fellow, if you could bring yourself to say a kind word to her, it would do all the good in the world. I have explained the whole thing to you. Even if Catherine has deceived you, as you say, surely she has been sufficiently punished. You must remember that those poor things put themselves under her protection. It was not Catherine's fault that her father came to Draycott.'

'I know all about that,' returned the Squire sharply. 'Elsie told me. Do you imagine that I blame Catherine for sheltering her own father, and when the old man was dying, too? Do you think I am made of adamant? Good heavens! if

she had only trusted me, if she had come to me and said, "Romney, my father and Eva are at Draycott, and I want you to help me to take care of them, why, I would have helped with all my heart.'

'I know that as well as you do, old man.'

'And yet my wife misunderstands me. Look here, Oliver, I am an easy-going sort of fellow, as long as people take me the right way, but I have an obstinate temper when I am roused. It is Catherine's want of trust that cuts me to the heart. I did not think she had a thought hidden from me, and all these months she has practised this deception. Somehow I feel as though I were dreaming,' continued the Squire, drawing his hand across his eyes. 'It cannot possibly be Kitty who is afraid of her husband.'

Lady Carfax wondered what was amiss when she saw her son's gloomy face at the dinner-table. The account of Catherine's fainting attack had reached her on her return home, and she had gone up at once to her daughter-in-law's room to pet and condole with her.

'She looks flushed and weak, and her eyes are far too bright,' she observed, but, to her surprise, Romney made no response. He was evidently in a bad humour, a very rare occurrence with the Squire; but Lady Carfax, with much tact, held her peace, and resolved to question Oliver afterwards, but directly after dinner Catherine sent for him.

She was lying on her couch by the open window, and looked ill and depressed.

'Is he very angry with me, Oliver?' she asked, as he sat down by her.

'He is more hurt than angry. Oh, Catherine! if you had only taken my advice and trusted him, all this trouble would have been averted. There is not a more generous fellow living than Romney.'

'Do you think I do not know that—I who adore him?' in a voice of strong emotion. 'Oh, how miserably weak I have been! And yet—and yet—if it were all to come over again, I should do the same.'

'I am sorry to hear you say that;' and Oliver's tone was somewhat repressive.

'Why should I not say it, if it be true? I was a coward on my father's account, and as long as he lived I should have acted like one. Oliver, what is to become of Eva? I cannot bear to leave her in that house, she is such a nervous little creature.'

'Romney has arranged for her to come here; Elsie and I are to fetch her to-morrow.' Then Catherine burst into passionate tears.

'Oh, how good he is, Oliver! Do beg him to come to me. I cannot rest until I ask his forgiveness. I will humble myself to him, and he shall say what he likes to me, if he will only forgive me in the end.'

'Oh, he will forgive you right enough,' returned Oliver, with assumed cheerfulness; 'but if I were

you I would leave all these explanations until to-morrow. Romney is a bit down to-night; you must give him time.'

But Catherine interrupted him:

'Do you mean that he will not come near me—that no message, however urgent, will bring him to me?'

'Oh, that is putting it too strongly,' returned Oliver kindly. 'You are too emotional, Catherine. There is no use working yourself into a fever. Look at it like a sensible woman; you have offended your husband by your want of confidence, and he feels himself badly used; he is not inclined to make it up to-night, but to-morrow he will be more like himself. Now, what is the most sensible line of conduct to pursue? Why, to send him a nice affectionate message by me, and then go to bed and take your sleeping-draught. Don't you agree with me, Catherine?'

'No,' she replied, and a strange look came into her beautiful eyes—'no, I do not agree with you; but you mean well, Oliver, and you have been very kind to me, my dear brother. Now go downstairs to Elsie, for I cannot talk any more, and wish Gran good-night for me.'

'And you will go to bed?'

'Oh yes, I shall go to bed,' in a dreary voice, 'but I am not ready just yet.' But as she put out her hand to dismiss him he felt it was burning.

'She looks on the brink of a nervous attack,' thought Oliver, as he went downstairs; 'but it is

no use trying to turn Romney from his purpose, and he absolutely refused to go near her; if he would only give her a good blowing up and settle it that way, it would be far better for Catherine; she is such an impetuous creature, she will never give him time to come round of his own accord.'

No, indeed; Oliver was perfectly right there. Even as he closed the drawing-room door behind him, Catherine was standing by her couch smoothing her dark hair with nervous fingers, and a minute later she crept with soft cautious steps to the library. The lamp was unlighted, but the clear moonlight shone full on Romney's face as he sat in his high-backed chair by the window; his pipe was still unlighted, and there was something forlorn and unrestful in his attitude that touched the wife's heart very keenly.

The next moment her arms were round his neck and she was leaning over him.

'You would not come to me—Oliver told me so. You were quite right, love; it was for me to come to you. Do you think I could sleep until I asked you to forgive me!'

'Catherine, what madness is this?' he said hastily. 'Do you want to drive me crazy with your inconsiderate conduct? Do you know you are ill, that Dr. Fergusson says that you are to be kept perfectly quiet, that you are on no account to leave your room? and yet you are guilty of this folly.'

'I am guilty of no folly in asking my husband's

forgiveness,' she said sadly, for this repulse frightened her. 'If I were dying, I would try and reach you somehow. Oh, Romney, let me stay with you a moment! let me speak to you!' for he had taken her up in his arms and was carrying her swiftly to the door.

'Not one word,' he said between his teeth. 'I will not be disobeyed like this. I told Oliver there should be no talk to-night; to-morrow I will tell you what I think; if you wish me to forgive you, you will respect my wishes to-night.'

'Very well,' she said faintly, and he laid her down carefully on her couch. She averted her face with a sob. He stood beside her a moment, hesitated, and then stooped down and kissed her forehead.

'Try to sleep,' he said, in a gentler voice. 'I shall be sitting up late, and I shall not disturb you.' And then he left the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

A HARD LESSON

'Hang there, like fruit, my soul,
Till the tree dies.'

Cymbeline.

'TRY to sleep.' Only a man could have said that.

Sleep, when every pulse was beating and every nerve quivering! when the shooting pain in her

temples amounted to positive agony! when thought was confused and yet active, and still the tiny hammers in her brain beat incessantly to the refrain, 'and to be wroth with one we love'—but again the last line failed her.

Mind and body were alike worn out by the strange tension of the last few weeks, and in her weakness and despondency Catherine was no longer able to discriminate or judge with any degree of calmness. For the moment she seemed utterly forsaken and desolate; Romney had put her away from him; he refused to listen to her explanation; the weight of his anger had crushed her, and in her morbid self-abandonment she fancied that he had ceased to love her.

'I have disappointed him,' she thought; 'he will never think the same of me again; to-morrow he will forgive me—at least, he will bring himself to tell me so—but he will never trust his Kitty again.'

All her life long Catherine never looked back on that hour without shuddering: her disordered fancies made even the clear white moonlight a terror to her; she felt as though she were possessed by some nightmare; she had no strength to leave her couch; a numbness seemed creeping over her; the cold, pitiless light weighed down her heavy eyelids; she shivered and longed for darkness.

A timid knock at the door failed to arouse her; it was repeated, and then a little white figure

glided between her and the moonlight, and the comforting touch of cool human hands was laid on her burning temples.

'Is that you, Elsie?'

'Yes, dear. I have come to wish you good-night. Why are you lying here? Do you know how late it is? eleven; and you have not begun to undress.'

'I have no strength to move,' she returned faintly. 'I have tried to rise, and I cannot. Elsie, I think my heart is broken. If Romney changes to me I cannot live.'

A footstep that had followed Elsie down the corridor paused outside the half-open door. Catherine's weak tones reached the unseen auditor.

'You must be dreaming, my poor dear,' returned Elsie, in a compassionate voice. 'Do you know what you are saying? It is absurd; you will think so yourself to-morrow.'

'To-morrow!' in the same strange stifled voice; 'but there is the night to come first. Elsie, listen to me; I feel I must talk. Do you know, I went down to Romney just now—was it just now, or hours ago?—I wanted to kneel by him and to ask his pardon as though I were a little child. "If I did wrong it was for my father's sake; but I will never hide a thought from you again—never—never!" that is what I would have said to him; but at my first word he silenced me.'

'Oh no! impossible!'

'Ah, but he did! he told me that I was ill, and that I ought not to have left my room. I was too weak to argue with him; but when he carried me back and told me to try and sleep, I could have laughed aloud in my agony. Sleep! with this sickness at my heart!'

'I will go down to the Squire; he has no right to be so hard to you. Let me go, dear Mrs. Romney.' But Catherine held her fast.

'No, you shall not go; he has every right to be hard with me, and I will bear my punishment meekly. Do you know that he has never before spoken an angry word to me—never, since I have been his wife, his most happy wife? To-morrow he will tell me that I have grieved him to the heart, that my want of trust has been a sin and a shame, and I shall not answer him a word; he shall say what he will to me, and I shall only love him more.'

'He will certainly forgive you; he knows now all that you have suffered for your father's sake.'

'Yes, he knows it all now. Elsie, do you know that my poor father blessed me? he called me "his good faithful daughter," and bade God bless me, over and over again.'

'And you were with him when he died?'

'Yes; I held him in my arms. Just at the last he wandered, and did not know us, but his words were very sweet. "Where the wicked cease from troubling"—we heard him murmur that—"and where the weary are at rest." Do you think

Romney will let me put those words over his tomb?' But as Elsie was about to answer her, a dark figure stood in the doorway.

'I am here, Catherine. Elsie, thank you for taking care of her.' And as Elsie rose, Romney took her place.

When the door closed behind the girl he knelt down beside his wife's couch. 'The door was open, and I heard my name,' he whispered. 'Darling, I was too hard to you; but we must forgive each other.' And as Catherine's weak arms drew his face down to hers, his reconciling kiss spoke more than words.

'I do not deserve to be so happy,' were Catherine's last words that night when she had ended her child-like confession, and Romney had again and again assured her of his forgiveness. 'Dear, it has been a hard lesson; but if you will trust your Kitty again, she will never disappoint you.'

'That is well,' he returned, with his old kindly smile. 'But now you are utterly exhausted; go to sleep, like a good child.' And Catherine obediently closed her eyes.

After all, Catherine paid dearly for her lesson. Not even her husband's generous forgiveness or the consciousness of his undiminished love could avert the threatened mischief. When morning came, Catherine could not rise from her bed; a low, nervous fever had laid hold of her, and as Romney listened to her confused wanderings as

she lived through those miserable hours again, his honest heart was full of pity and remorse.

Catherine believed herself still under the cloud of her husband's displeasure, and would entreat his forgiveness over and over again. 'If you love me less, I shall die,' she would say to him. 'I will not live without your love.'

When she grew better, it was touching to see her utter weakness and dependence on him. 'I thought I was going to die,' she said to him once, 'but God has been very good to us. When I get well I mean to be a better wife to you; you shall never again have cause to complain of me.'

'The old Kitty is good enough for me,' he would say wistfully; for the look of pain in her eyes saddened him; it was a new thing to hear Catherine accusing herself; he longed with a longing that surprised himself to hear her frank laugh again and the droll, merry speeches that had gladdened his daily life.

This gentle saddened Catherine was a new development; but his mother comforted him.

'Catherine is too weak to throw off her sad thoughts,' she said, very sensibly. 'You must take her away; you know Dr. Fergusson recommended a thorough change. Elsie has offered to take Eva back with her to Banksland, and will keep her willingly until her marriage. Why not take Catherine abroad? Harry will be quite safe with me.' And, after some demur, Romney acted on this advice. The plan answered well, and

Catherine soon recovered tone and spirits among snow mountains and Swiss valleys, and her sensitive nature gathered new strength. Romney always called it their second honeymoon; and though he sometimes remarked that his old Kitty had never come back, one thing was certain—that he never loved his wife so well as he did now, when he saw returning health and peace stamped on her sweet face, and knew in his heart of hearts that the new Kitty was a dearer and a wiser woman.

THE END.

'BUT MEN MUST WORK'

To

MY FELLOW-WORKER AND FRIEND

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE

This Little Story

IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

'BUT MEN MUST WORK'

CHAPTER I

MISS HILLYARD

In looking back over one's past life from the safe, though somewhat monotonous, level of middle age, one is conscious of added clearness of vision, of a more thorough comprehension of the verities and unmasked realities of existence, that start up like whitened milestones along an unending road. In the hurry of youth we overlook these prominent points that intersect the different stages of our being; the light is too strong in our eyes; one must descend into the well to view the concealed starlight. We draw our own visionary horizon. To be young is to live. Beyond youth lies blankness, absolute negation: to grow old—pshaw! as well threaten the young with a palsy, with the death-in-life of paralysis! it is the dreadful hereafter, which no healthy imagination will depict for a moment. And yet, if they only knew it, age

offers delicate compensations. In a flat country one can walk more securely, and a greater breadth of landscape adds to the pleasure of the pedestrian; the imagination may shrink somewhat, but the memory enfolds treasures of past comforts and experiences: in the baldest and most prosaic life the affections must have watered many an oasis.

But philosophy, however well defined, may grow irksome. I have been tempted to generalize, before gathering up a few stray threads from a life that by most folk would be termed meagre and uninteresting, but which, lived moment by moment in fearless simplicity, was to me, its owner, certainly not devoid of pleasurable sensations. Written down in black and white, the amount of pleasure may seem at first sight somewhat limited.

A middle-aged worker in the human hive, a daily governess without living kith and kin, certainly presents a modest margin to expectation. Life's interest must wax feeble at such a low level; there could be no high-tides of strong recurrent excitement. Chut! let these young merry babblers hold their peace: would I change places with them, knowing that their climbing powers have not yet been essayed, that they are still at the bottom of the ascent, with all their troubles bristling like an array of spears to meet them?

Once I, too, was discontented, and threw weary, critical glances around me; but that was before I learned my lesson more perfectly—that hardest of all lessons, taught by a saintly teacher, 'to ask

nothing, to refuse nothing'—to be content with following the reapers. Now people tell me sometimes, and they say it with all earnestness, that it makes them feel happier in their minds, and more satisfied with themselves, only to be with me, 'for you are so cheery, my dear Miss Osborne, such a comfortable sort of person altogether, that it is really a relief to talk to you;' and a speech like this makes me supremely happy for a fortnight, for to diffuse heart sunshine must be better than all the gifts of the fairies put together. But it was not always so. How well I remember one bitter March afternoon, when the east wind that penetrated to my bones and scarified every nerve seemed more bearable than the dull fogginess that had crept over my spirits and blocked up every avenue to cheerfulness!

I was in mourning for my sole relative, an aunt, my father's sister, and a widow in tolerable circumstances. I had attended her death-bed, and, though there had been small interchange of sympathy between us, I had striven to mourn for her decently. A certain pathos at the idea that there was only one Osborne remaining formed the nucleus of a few tears. They dried up—nay, they were frozen—when a fifty-pound note was put in my hand, and a well-digested plan for a dozen almshouses was shown to me by the lawyer. I had not consciously coveted my aunt's money; my health was good, and I was not afraid of work: nevertheless, the niggardliness of the action op-

pressed me. There had only been two Osbornes, and she was my father's sister. Well, peace be with her! she meant well, and the old women whom she clothed and fed as well as housed doubtless rose up and called her blessed; but I have a notion that in that other world the scheme over which her lawyer gloated would hardly have looked so fair and consistent, and even an engraved motto, cut in the whiteness of the stone, may have failed to provoke admiration in angelic eyes. Troubles seldom come singly; I was out of employment just then: my last pupil had married, and I had nothing else in view; and but for my scanty savings and the fifty pounds, together with a tolerable stock of clothes, I should have felt my courage at a low ebb. As I walked through the quiet chain of squares lying behind Bloomsbury, I fought with an unusual and most benumbing sense of utter nameless depression; a feeling of loneliness, of failure, of unwonted pessimism, weighed me down. 'What is the meaning of it all?' I asked myself querulously. 'What is the use of living a mere unit of humanity? I belong to no one; no one cares for me or would be the better or worse if I were to be swept out of life: there are governesses enough in the world, and far too many women jostling one another in the search for employment: like Jonah, I am weary of my life,' and so on through the whole gamut of feminine despondency; and all the time a dozen wrinkled, smiling countenances seemed to rebuke

my sourness. Nevertheless, the niggardliness of my only relative still oppressed me. Money was less to me than kindness; all my life I had wished to be loved; so little would have contented me—just the dregs where others had quaffed. It was in this mood and under these depressing circumstances that I presented myself at the agency office to which I usually resorted. Miss Brown was an old acquaintance of mine; her nod and smile called up a wintry smile in response; anything else in the general fogginess was clearly impossible. She looked at me a little narrowly as she pointed to a chair: she was making an entry; she would speak to me in a moment. Five minutes of irritating quill-penmanship on her side, of dissatisfied self-communing on mine, then Miss Brown was ready for business.

'You look cold and tired, Miss Osborne. Draw nearer to the fire. It is a depressing day. I had your note yesterday.'

'I hope you have something in view that will suit me. I am not over-particular, you know.'

'Should you object to the country?'

'Not at all. I feel in need of change. London all the year round is monotonous; but,' in a less sanguine tone, and with a return of fogginess, 'you forget that I have an objection to any residential situation. I prefer a moderate degree of freedom, my evenings to myself.' For how could I part with Mousquetaire, the four-footed companion of my lodgings?

'Ah, no, I remember; you only desired daily employment; and, strange to say, I think I have something that will suit you exactly. I was reading your note when a lady called; she had been recommended to my agency. Now, I wonder if you would think Walton too far from London—Walton in ——shire, I mean.'

'The distance would be a matter of indifference to me, as long as it is in England. I have no wish to go abroad. Let me hear all about it, Miss Brown.'

'The lady's name was Hillyard—Miss Hillyard. She said her mother's health obliged them to live in a very secluded way, and that her sister's education had been somewhat neglected in consequence—at least, as far as regards accomplishments. Miss Hillyard was a very pleasing person'—here Miss Brown paused, as though to find an adequate expression—'a most interesting person, exceedingly so,' breaking off without rounding her sentence. She was always a little rugged in speech.

'Young?'

'Ah, yes; not a girl—by no means a girl. Indeed, I noticed gray hairs. A very lady-like person, and decidedly out of the common. Money seemed no object. She offered liberal terms, but the conditions struck me as a little peculiar.'

'In what way?' somewhat sharply.

Miss Brown seemed to find my question difficult.

'I can hardly tell you'—with an apologetic laugh at her own vagueness. 'It was more the sort of impression given me, for Miss Hillyard was perfectly straightforward and practical. She said at once that a resident governess was out of the question; the presence of a stranger in the house would distress her mother's weak nerves; a few hours daily would be all that would be required; and then she asked me a little anxiously if I thought a lady would mind living in rooms near them—would a short walk be any impediment?—would not many ladies be glad to have their evenings free? And then I thought of you. Miss Hillyard's face quite brightened — she looked sad enough, poor thing!—when I told her that in my opinion you would be the very person.'

'I can see nothing peculiar in this. It all sounds perfectly natural.'

But to this Miss Brown made no verbal response, only her lips formed into a curious little twist, as though she were determined to keep her thoughts to herself, and I at once felt my curiosity stimulated.

'Miss Hillyard proposed that you should call on her this afternoon,' she continued. 'She is anxious to leave town as soon as possible. She is staying at a hotel in—— Stop, I have the address here; I will give you the paper. Any time between three and five will do; there will be no need of references. I have settled all that, so you can make your own terms, and I hope you

will be able to come to a satisfactory arrangement.'

'I hope so, too.' And then we shook hands, and, after a kindly remark from Miss Brown to the effect that I looked less tired than when I entered her office, I took leave and faced the east wind again. What had happened to me? Miss Brown was not a romantic person; our interview had been strictly business-like. Nevertheless, I felt cheered, warmed, mentally refreshed. Some current of healthy human interest had dispelled the fog. I let myself into my lodgings with my old alertness, and the very sight of Mousquetaire's waving black tail as he flew downstairs to greet me made me feel cheerful. Let those who will laugh at a lonely spinster, but for an intelligent, loving little companion my black Pomeranian had no equal.

It was in a far different spirit that I set out on my quest that afternoon. I was callous to the east wind, and, instead of indulging inward spleen, I was summing up with pardonable pride my little stock of accomplishments. Music was my forte. I was considered by competent authorities to be an excellent teacher. My French was pure, and I had some knowledge of drawing. My weak points—but I would veil them artfully. There was no need to present them in too strong a light; they must be toned, softened down, left in the background. By this time I had reached the quiet, old-fashioned hotel where Miss Hillyard

had taken up her temporary abode. A gray-haired waiter came forward to learn my errand, and at once conducted me to a room where a lady was writing in the window. 'A lady to see Miss Hillyard,' he observed sonorously, and the bent head was at once raised.

The room was somewhat dim, in spite of the firelight, and for a moment I could not quite discern Miss Hillyard's features. When I did—but it is almost impossible to describe the sudden shock (I know no other word) of surprise, of involuntary admiration, that came over me when I first saw Judith Hillyard's face. Ridiculous as it must sound from the lips of a middle-aged woman, I understood at that moment what people mean when they talk of falling in love at first sight.

Had I fallen in love with Miss Hillyard, or was I only penetrated by a sudden feeling of pity for the young, weary face that came between me and the light?

Yes, it was a young face, in spite of the gray hairs that threaded the dark, smooth coils; and the figure, thin and angular in its sharpness, was young, too. Those thin, sharp lines spoiled everything. They marred the perfect beauty of the face, they hindered all youthful roundness. As I sat there—for she had waived me to a seat with a hurried, nervous gesture—an odd idea came into my head. I thought if I were an artist, a real artist, I would ask her to sit to me for Ruth,

the Moabitess, when her faithful widowed heart was pleading with her mother-in-law. Something in the sad dark eyes that suddenly met mine brought the old Jewish idyll to my memory.

She was so silent, she seemed to find it so difficult to commence the conversation, that I came boldly to her relief.

'Miss Brown asked me to call. I am Miss Osborne. She had an idea that I should suit you. You require a finishing governess for your sister.'

'Ah, yes,' very nervously—but how deep her voice was! but for a certain richness and sweetness and a well-controlled modulation, it would almost have been too deep for a woman—'ah, yes, Miss Brown was good enough to recommend you; she knew our requirements, and she was sure you would suit us perfectly; indeed, she spoke so highly that we ought to consider ourselves fortunate if we can secure your services.' Here Miss Hillyard made me a timid little bow, and the glimmer of a smile passed over her fine features.

'I do not know about that. I am old enough to be a little old-fashioned. I have not taken up all the new-fangled theories of education.'

'That is all the better'—very gently.

'I think I could undertake to teach French and music, and even drawing, to your satisfaction. With regard to German——'

'There will be no occasion for German. Muriel —my sister, I mean—is very backward. French

and music—ah, and drawing: that will be an amusement. Music is the chief difficulty.' Here she looked mutely at a closed piano behind me. I was quick to read her thoughts. I had a singular pleasure even at that early stage of our acquaintance in interpreting them.

'Shall I play to you? Would you care to hear me?'

Her whole face brightened. I had no need to put the question. She had lacked courage to ask me—that was all. I played as though my whole future depended on her verdict. When I rose, she was wiping a few quiet tears from her eyes.

'How beautifully you play, Miss Osborne! The very notes seem to speak. Muriel will be delighted. Miss Brown spoke truly. Ah, I hope you will consent to teach Muriel; that our terms will satisfy you.' And here she named a sum that seemed sufficiently handsome. The neighbourhood and my lodgings next passed under review, and here again Miss Hillyard seemed a little anxious. The country was very nice, but should I think a mile's walk every day too long?

'A mile!' somewhat surprised at this question. 'Is Leylands such a large place?'

'No, indeed; it is only a tiny village. There are no lodgings to be found there; but there are some nice rooms vacant in Walton. I would take them if you like. Miss Trotter is such a pleasant woman, and there is only one other lodger in the house, a gentleman, one of the masters belonging

to Walton School. I shall be going there to-morrow, and could make all arrangements—that is, if you are not afraid of the walk.'

'Nothing would suit me better, and I shall always be home in daylight;' for Miss Hillyard had named from half-past nine to two as my hours. We made a few more necessary arrangements, fixed time, train, and put a few mutual questions, and then, as she seemed uncertain how to dismiss me, I brought the interview to a close by rising from my seat. She looked relieved, put out her hand, then drew it back again and gave me a second shy little bow.

'This day fortnight, Miss Hillyard.

'Thanks, very much. I will write and tell you when I have made arrangements with Miss Trotter. There is a dog, you say?'

'Yes, my black Pomeranian—such a beauty, Miss Hillyard! All my landladies are devoted to him. I can go nowhere without Mousquetaire.'

She smiled, as though my enthusiastic tone amused her. 'Very well,' was all she said, very quietly, and then the waiter opened the door.

That night I felt as though I had been bewitched. As I lay between sleeping and waking, Miss Hillyard's dark, beautiful face haunted me; I could see her thin hand raised in gentle gesticulation, could hear that deep, strangely-vibrating voice, so young and yet so sad. What could it mean?

CHAPTER II

'PASTURES NEW'

I LOOKED anxiously for the expected letter. In two or three days it came. Everything had been satisfactorily arranged. Miss Trotter had promised to make me comfortable; my train was fixed, and with a few kindly words followed the signature, Judith Hillyard. I wonder how many times I read that concise, lady-like note. Admiration of the beautiful handwriting was my legitimate excuse. If I had never seen Miss Hillyard, that clear, frank calligraphy would have prejudiced me in her favour. I made my few preparations, bade good-bye to the half-dozen acquaintances who styled themselves my friends, and when the morning of my departure arrived, the April sunshine and showers seemed symbolic of the mixed feelings with which I took my seat in the railway compartment.

It was somewhat late in the afternoon when I arrived. A little country omnibus awaited me. There were no other passengers, but I was content to indulge my thoughts undisturbed, as I feasted my eyes on the green-budding hedgerows, so refreshing to my sight after the close London streets. By-and-by a few straggling houses told me that we were approaching our destination. I

had a flitting view of an old-fashioned market-place: then we turned a corner; a fresh wind blew in our faces; a sunny country road seemed to stretch endlessly before us; there were a hay-stack, some gaily-painted carts in a wheelwright's yard, and just opposite two pleasant-looking houses, with their lower windows somewhat hidden by a thick privet hedge. The doors were wide open, and, as the omnibus stood before one of them, a trim little woman with red hair and very round blue eyes took possession of me and my luggage.

'Miss Trotter, I believe?'

'Yes, ma'am; and I hope you do not find yourself tired after your journey. Dear me, ma'am! is that the dog? What a beauty! Miss Hillyard mentioned him to me, and, though no lover of dogs, though exceedingly partial to cats, can find no objection to him at all—indeed, should be ashamed to mention such a thing in connection with him.'

It was too soon to detect any peculiarity in Miss Trotter's style of speech; it was much later on that I observed her invincible dislike to the nominative case. Well, we all have our idiosyncrasies, but I never met anyone before who so persistently slurred over this useful appendage to a sentence; it was certainly novel, though at the same time somewhat embarrassing, as it tended to obscure the plain meaning. After a time we had our little joke, and called it the Trotter dialect;

we—dear me! it strikes me that I am becoming a little obscure myself. While Miss Trotter made friends with Mousquetaire, I looked round my sitting-room with secret but strong approval. It was a large, comfortable room, and tolerably well furnished; there were two easy-chairs, a couch, a writing-table, and a large recess where my piano could stand; tea was already laid on the round table, a bright fire burned cheerily in the grate, and a basket of primroses and some Neapolitan violets were on the small table in the window.

My attention was drawn to them at once. 'Could Miss Hillyard have brought them?' I observed, half to myself, but Miss Trotter heard me.

'You are right, ma'am; drove over in the pony-carriage; brought the posy and some new-laid eggs and the little cake, with their compliments.'

'They—the two Miss Hillyards?'

'Yes, ma'am, and the younger one brought them in and put them on that table, charged me not to move them: "They look so nice, Miss Trotter, just where they are; and please give my compliments and my sister's." Pretty young lady as one wishes to see, and nice spoken, too. Now, ma'am, shall I show you your bedroom?—at the top of the house, am sorry to say, but in this world must study one's interest, and am always expecting a let for drawing-floor, lady or gentleman no object, only good references and respectability insured.'

I followed Miss Trotter up two long flights of stairs, and down a long, draughty passage. My bedroom was as large as my sitting-room, but the ceiling was low. When I had taken off my bonnet, I stood for a moment at the passage window admiring the pleasant view. It overlooked the back-buildings belonging to a farm; there were the remains of a haystack, a long wooden shed, and some pigs grunting in the straw-yard. Then came the wheelwright's premises: a cart with vermilion wheels blocked up the centre; carts of all sizes, wheels, piles of timber, seemed everywhere; a broad-shouldered man with the gait of Vulcan and a red woollen cap limped across the yard; a little yellow dog ran at his heels barking. Beyond lay some green meadows, stretching as far as one could see; and over everything a soft spring sky, with little dappled clouds, streaked here and there with gold. Two or three children passed, dropping primroses as they went. Some oxen were lowing plaintively, a cock was crowing, the swallows or house-martins were twittering in the eaves. How fresh and bright it all looked! 'My lines have fallen to me in a pleasant place,' I thought, as I walked down the long windy passage.

As I paced along contentedly, I heard Mousquetaire bark in a genial manner, and then followed the flopping of his bushy tail against the stairs, which told me he had found a new acquaintance. I peeped over the balustrade rather curiously, and

saw a tall young man bending over him and evidently making much of him.

'What is your name, you pretty little fellow?' I heard him say; and then as I moved involuntarily he looked up, and on seeing me turned rather red. I guessed, of course, that this was my fellow-lodger, and wished him good-evening as I passed. He replied in rather an embarrassed tone, and ran upstairs at racing speed. Very shortly afterwards I saw him again. Miss Trotter was clearing the tea-things, and I was standing at the window, wishing rather ungratefully that the privet hedge did not obscure my view of the road, when he sauntered down to the gate, and stood looking out with rather a wistful expression.

I had a good look at him then. He was a tall, thin young man, and carried his height well; he had a pale complexion and peculiarly-cut features, and his hair was dark and closely cropped after the usual convict style at present in vogue. It was rather a Roman type of face, and reminded me of the picture of a young gladiator I had once seen. Perhaps at first sight he did not prepossess me, but I remember I was struck with his free and stately carriage. After all, it matters little how a man looks if he only walks well and speaks like a gentleman. One of my pupils once told me that I ought to be blind, 'for I notice, Miss Osborne,' she remarked, with the pert cleverness of the nineteenth-century young lady, 'that you talk more of people's voices than of their faces; you

so often say, 'How nicely she speaks!' when I should remark, 'How nice-looking she is!'

Now, my young Roman, as I called him to myself in an amused sort of way, had only muttered pleasantly; so for once I was disposed to be critical over features that were certainly of no ordinary type.

'Mr. Royston is fond of taking the air,' observed Miss Trotter, with a view of making overtures to conversation; 'stands like that for half an hour at a time. Anyone not knowing him might suppose he was watching for someone.'

'His name is Royston, you say?'

'Yes, ma'am; and no one could find a nicer-spoken young gentleman; gives no trouble, and never fusses with his meals; it is, 'Anything you think best, Miss Trotter,' just as though mutton or beef were alike to him; and so light-hearted, too; it quite makes one feel young again to hear him whistling about the house like a blackbird, or strumming fine pieces on his piano.

'Indeed!' I observed, rather absently; for I never encouraged gossip about my fellow-lodgers, and at this moment the subject of Miss Trotter's encomium suddenly wheeled round and walked quickly into the house. His movements were so sudden that I had no time to draw back from the window, and received a quick, searching glance from a pair of bright, keen eyes. I felt a little annoyed at this contretemps—the young man would think I was watching him; but the next instant

my thoughts took a different direction: a tall, slender figure in black was coming up the little flagged path, and with a glow of pleasure that must have been fully apparent to her, I went forward to welcome Miss Hillyard.

'Miss Hillyard,' I said, a little too impulsively, 'this is quite an unexpected pleasure. I had no idea of a visit this evening. It is most kind.'

I think the warmth of my reception took her a little by surprise, for she coloured slightly.

'I am fond of an evening walk. It was no trouble; and I wished to ascertain for myself that you were quite comfortable. Do you like your rooms?'

My answer quite satisfied her on this point: I professed myself well pleased with my surroundings.

'I am very glad. I hope Miss Trotter will be attentive; she is a very civil, nice-tempered woman, and generally gives satisfaction to her lodgers. If there be anything that we can do for your comfort, I hope you will let us know.'

'Thank you very much, Miss Hillyard; but I am a person of few wants.'

But at this moment Mousquetaire thrust himself into the conversation, and his solicitations for notice were so prettily imperative that even Miss Hillyard's gravity relaxed, and she took him up and petted him to his heart's content.

'I remembered your dog, and left Hector outside,' she observed presently. 'Do you admire

deerhounds, Miss Osborne? Mine is a splendid specimen, and so sagacious and faithful. I never seem to need a companion when I have Hector.'

'That is just how I feel with Mousquetaire.'

And then we descanted a little on the merits of our respective pets. As we talked, I noticed Miss Hillyard grew a little more at her ease; the nervous fluttering of her fingers, as though she wanted to feel something, which had struck me so much at our first interview, had almost ceased, and a greater look of animation increased her beauty tenfold. But for the wanness and thinness, what an exquisite creature she would be! as I thought more than once that evening.

We became quite friendly and confidential after a time, and, without seeming to question me, she somehow elicited a great deal about my former life. Perhaps she considered it her duty to know all about me. I responded with perfect readiness. I even told her about my aunt's legacy. When she heard of the almshouses, she shook her head.

'That hardly seems right. Perhaps I ought not to say so, and one should not judge the dead; but to endow strangers and leave her own niece to work for her living—— I am afraid if I were you, Miss Osborne, I should feel some secret resentment. How could your aunt justify such inconsistency to her own conscience? But'—speaking more to herself than to me—'some people contrive to deaden their consciences.'

'My aunt was a philanthropist: she liked her charity to furnish a wide area.'

'In other words, she was a Pharisee, and liked to hear the trumpet sounded before her.'

'I am afraid so, Miss Hillyard.'

'Well, there are many people who resemble her; but it is a great pity. I think they need to learn over again the A B C of Christianity. Now it is growing dark, and I must be going. I can hear Hector bark, too, as though he were becoming impatient.'

'It is too dark and too late for you to walk alone down that country road, my dear Miss Hillyard. How imprudent!'

I spoke in my governess tone, but Miss Hillyard only smiled.

'Imprudent! with Hector! Why, he would fly at anyone who ventured to accost me. There is nothing to fear. I am quite used to this road, and Hector and I often take a moonlight stroll together. It is Muriel who is timid, who thinks there are tramps behind every haystack. Well, we shall see you to-morrow, then, Miss Osborne—that is, if you are sure you would not rather have a day's rest after your journey?'

I satisfied her on that point. I was willing—nay, anxious—to enter on my duties at once; I was strong—half a dozen journeys would not have wearied me.

'Very well, then we will expect you. Muriel will be only too delighted to set to work at once.

Please remember, Miss Osborne, what I told you just now—you do not turn once until you reach Leylands. It is a tiny village. Any child will direct you to The Nook—that is the name of our house. Mind you do not trust to yourself to find it, or you will certainly pass it. Good-bye until to-morrow.'

There was a faint pressure in response to my cordial grasp, a still fainter smile, and Miss Hillyard's tall figure vanished swiftly through the gate. I followed her, unperceived. The spring dusk had not yet deepened into obscurity, and I could see the large, noble-looking hound circle round her once or twice with joyous barks before he took his place at her side, as though he knew it was his duty to keep close to her. I watched them until they had disappeared. In spite of Miss Hillyard's words, I felt vaguely uneasy, the road looked so dark and solitary. What right had a young and beautiful woman to walk alone at so late an hour? Was her mother too much of an invalid to control her daughter's movements? But at this moment I was disturbed in my reflections; there was a quick step behind me, and, with a muttered 'I beg your pardon,' Mr. Royston passed me, walking in the same direction, as though Leylands were his destination.

'What a curious coincidence that he should have selected that road!' I thought, as I went back to my room to begin my unpacking; but

it relieved me a little to know that there was someone else on the road. If I had known the way I would have insisted on accompanying her.

An hour later I heard Mr. Royston return. He was whistling as he came up the steps and let himself in. By-and-by I heard him pass my door and go into his room.

CHAPTER III

THE NOOK

THE next morning I had just finished my early breakfast, and was lingering by the open door a moment to enjoy the crisp freshness of the air, when Mr. Royston, in his cap and gown, turned in at the gate. To my surprise, as I turned and civilly wished him good-morning, he stopped, and observed genially:

'It is really a beautiful morning, though there is a suspicion of frost in the air;' and then he added, in quite a friendly tone, 'It seems we are near neighbours.'

'Yes, indeed'—with a glance at his open door and breakfast-table.

'I hope, if I can be any assistance to you in any little way'—here he turned rather red, and seemed shy again—'that you will not scruple to make me useful; a lady alone sometimes needs things—I shall be very happy, as Miss Trotter knows—ahem!

the paper—— Should you care to see the paper, Miss Osborne?'

He knew my name already. I had hardly expected these friendly overtures so soon, but I was never slow to respond to any kindly offer. I thanked him; I was going out immediately; I had no leisure until the afternoon; by-and-by, if he would be so good; but after to-day I hoped I should take in a paper for myself.

'Oh, you are going out?'

And he still lingered, as though desirous to prolong the conversation. Last night he had seemed very shy and retiring, had rather shunned me than otherwise. The change in his manner somewhat surprised me, but I was old enough to put any young man at his ease, and it was certainly pleasanter for such close neighbours to be on good terms; so, instead of rebuking his youthful insistence, I answered without hesitation that I was going to Leylands.

'Leylands? Ah, I thought so; at least, it is a pretty spot; everyone walks there—it—I—you shall have the paper this afternoon. I believe my breakfast is waiting.'

He had evidently come to the end of his conversational powers for the present. He eyed me wistfully but nervously, and backed into his room.

He had made me late, and I hurried off to get ready for my walk. As I passed quickly by the house I looked back. Miss Trotter was at the door, with Mousquetaire in her arms; the poor

little fellow was whining to follow me. As I did so, I noticed that Mr. Royston's room had a side-window overlooking the road. Perhaps he had no appetite for his breakfast, but he was calmly sitting on the ledge, as though fully determined to see the last of me.

I cogitated for full five minutes on this small circumstance. Why should my movements interest a stranger? Why was Mr. Royston so evidently desirous to commence an acquaintanceship? Young men were not in my line; hitherto I had only admired them at a distance; as a general rule, they give a wide berth to women of my age. The little problem at once amused and disturbed me.

I forgot him after a time, and gave myself up to enjoyment. The spring air was so sweet and fresh, the birds' songs so jubilant. The tender and vivid green of the budding hedgerows seemed to rest one's eyes. By-and-by the road grew more picturesque; there was an avenue of beeches that led to the village; there were a few trim cottages, and a tiny green, with an old tree in the midst of it, where some children were playing. I singled out a rosy-cheeked, white-headed urchin, and asked him to direct me to The Nook, and he at once pointed with a grimy finger towards the church.

'Keep at the back of the church and the Hall, miss, and walk on till you see a green door in the wall; that's The Nook, sure enough. Pull the bell hard.'

These directions were simple enough, and I followed them implicitly. I passed the little gray church, and a small park where some black cattle were browsing, and just beyond was a high blank wall, flanked by two windows, with a narrow green door, and a lamp over it. As I pulled the massive bell with some difficulty, and listened to its dull jangle, I could not help thinking that Miss Hillyard was wise in telling me to make inquiries. I should have wandered round and round the village, and should never have discovered that this wall belonged to a dwelling-house. The windows were so high up that they would never have attracted my attention, and I should only have imagined that the green door opened into the Hall grounds. I was kept waiting for what seemed to my impatience a considerable time; but I was not disposed to set the discordant bell jingling again, and by-and-by I heard footsteps, and a grim-looking elderly woman opened the gate, and muttered a sort of apology as she asked me to walk in.

The Nook, regarded from an outside point of view, struck me as a singularly forbidding-looking residence for two girls; but I was agreeably surprised when I found myself in a beautiful little hall, fitted up with carved oaken bookcases and an old-fashioned settle, the polished floor half covered by a Turkey carpet, and stands of ferns and flowering plants in every available corner. My stern-faced guide ushered me stolidly into a pleasant sunny room, with a deep bay-window

overlooking the garden. It was evidently the morning or living-room, and was fitted up more for comfort and use than for outward show. The deep easy-chairs had well-worn cretonne coverings; the carpet and curtains were handsome, but showed signs of age; a semi-grand piano and a grandfather's clock were the most costly objects in the room, with the exception of the well-filled bookshelves, many of the volumes being bound in Russia leather and antique bindings. I was amazed at the number of books; the table, cabinet, even chairs, were strewn with them; a copy of Dante's 'Inferno' was wide open, as though its reader had only just laid it down. There were an easel and some rudimentary sketches in crayon and oils, and a photographic apparatus, while the sweet subtle scent of Neapolitan violets pervaded the whole room. I stepped up to the window and regarded the outside prospect, which was still more inviting. A small circular lawn, with beds full of spring plants, seemed to slope gently to a belt of shrubs, while some trees shut out any further view. I found afterwards that this was a tiny lime avenue leading to a small enclosed meadow, while another shrubbery-walk, still more secluded, led to a fernery. Everything was in perfect order; not a stray leaf lay on the short, velvety turf, and the newly-gravelled paths looked very inviting. I was wondering how long I was to be left to my own meditations, when I heard a soft, melodious whistling in the shrubbery.

The next moment Hector lounged lazily into sight, the sunshine glittering on his massive silver collar. A young lady in a gray tweed dress and sailor's hat followed him. Hector was the first to perceive me. The intrusion of a stranger evidently astonished him: he uttered a low growl, and his rough lean body showed signs of agitation. A nearer inspection, however, satisfied him that I was no dangerous intruder, and he stalked solemnly up to me and regarded me with profound gravity, as though waiting for an introduction.

'A friend, Hector; yes, by all means a friend,' observed a laughing voice; and the hound laid his slender nose confidingly against my arm. 'Hector cannot understand visitors at The Nook,' continued the young lady, with an amused look; 'he shares my opinion that our house ought to be called The Hermitage. I do not believe,' wrinkling up her white forehead, 'that, with the exception of the butcher and the baker, we have ever had a morning caller before.'

There was a pleasant frankness about this outspoken address that was singularly prepossessing. Muriel Hillyard certainly did not share her sister's uncommon beauty, but she was a very piquant, interesting little person, and most people would have called her exceedingly pretty. Her complexion was of the brunette type; her large dark eyes were very brilliant and expressive, and there was something very charming in her childlike naïveté, and low, musical laugh.

'I believe I am speaking to my new pupil?'

'Yes, I am Muriel,' tossing her sailor hat on the nearest chair. 'Will you sit down, Miss Osborne? there is a very comfortable chair beside you. How do you like Walton?—but you can hardly have seen it yet. Is not the walk to Leylands pretty? Judith and I are so fond of it.'

'I have not seen your sister yet.'

'No; my mother had one of her bad attacks this morning, and she cannot leave her. You know, of course, what an invalid poor mother is. Sometimes she cannot bear Judith out of her sight; and she has to sit for hours in a darkened room. I wonder how Judith can bear it, it must be so terribly depressing; but, of course, it tells on her.'

'Miss Hillyard certainly looks delicate.'

'Yes, she is very thin,' with a sigh. 'I tell her sometimes that living in this stupid way will make an old woman of her before her time; but she only says the sooner the better.'

'I dare say you have a good many friends.' I could have bitten my tongue for making such a foolish speech; for Muriel coloured at the question, and then gave vent to an impatient little laugh, and shrugged her shoulders.

'I am not aware of their names. Did I not tell you that visitors were unknown at The Hermitage? How can we have friends when even a strange voice brings on one of mother's nervous attacks? It is very unfortunate'—in rather a pettish voice.

'I don't suppose any girl of my age has to lead such a quiet life. I feel as though I shall break out one day. I am not like Judith: she is a perfect saint.'

I found this confidence a little embarrassing, and, to change the subject, I gently hinted that we should set to work; but Miss Muriel had evidently a will of her own, and she at once negatived this suggestion.

'There is no hurry; and we have not made each other's acquaintance yet,' she returned decidedly. 'I never intended to begin this morning.'

'You mean to waste a whole morning?'

'Certainly I do. I am in a mood for idleness. I hope you do not mean to be strict, Miss Osborne. Judith,' in a very pointed voice, 'gave me a very different impression. Perhaps,' with a mischievous glance at me, 'you would like to know what Judith said. If you are very good, and give me my own way for six months, perhaps I may tell you.'

'Thank you, Miss Hillyard.'

'I am not Miss Hillyard; Judith is that; and I much prefer to be called Muriel. Do you know, I generally get my own way when I am really set on a thing. That is why you are here this morning, because I rebelled and talked to our old lawyer; he is such a kind old man; he is like a father to us. I told him it was a shame that I could not play a piece better than a child of twelve, and I insisted that I should either go to school or have a finishing governess. Fancy going to school

at eighteen! But I would have done it; and so they were obliged to give way.'

'Was your sister so averse to the idea of a governess?'

'Yes, but only on poor mother's account. She has got a fancy, you know, that she cannot see people. That is why you are not to take your meals here, because mother would not leave her room if she knew there was anyone in the house. It is a very distressing form of illness,' finished Muriel, in her candid way, 'for it affects other people's lives so much. There, it does me good to grumble to someone. Judith always looks so pained when I make discontented remarks, that I try to hide my little feelings; but I may grumble to you?' coaxingly. Then, without waiting for my answer, 'But of course I may; your face tells me so. Now shall we plan to-morrow's work? I will show you my books and drawings, and you shall see what a dunce I am.'

As this coincided with my wishes, we were soon cheerfully at work. Muriel proved herself uncommonly docile: she answered all my questions in a straightforward way, and took my suggestions in good part. I found she was exceedingly well read in English literature, and that the basis of a solid, useful education had been formed. In some branches she knew more than most young ladies of her age. For example, she had been well grounded in Latin and Euclid; she said her sister had taught her. 'Judith is

eight years older than I am,' she observed; 'she is dreadfully old—six-and-twenty—and you have no idea how clever she is. I am only backward as regards accomplishments.' I soon discovered that she spoke the truth; many children of twelve played better, and her knowledge of the French language was sadly limited. She seemed eager to repair these defects, and assured me that she would practise diligently; but her chief desire seemed to be to learn to sketch. She was certainly clever with her pencil, and, though perfectly untaught, had made some pretty little drawings. My suggestion that we should devote an occasional afternoon to rambles with our sketch-books brought such a brilliant rush of colour to her face that I altered my opinion, for she certainly looked beautiful then. 'What a delicious idea! and I am so tired of solitary strolls. But are you sure, Miss Osborne, that you can spare the time? I have no right to monopolize your afternoons. Besides, there is the walk; it will tire you dreadfully. If you could only have luncheon with us; but I dare not mention it to Judith, it would only distress her; and, poor dear! she has burdens enough. If I only thought——' But here I checked her. Luncheon was out of the question, I told her, and the walk was of no consequence; I was very strong, and thought little of five or six miles. 'There must be pretty spots within an easy distance of either Walton or Leylands,' I went on. 'We will talk to your

sister. Perhaps you could meet me half-way. There will be no difficulty about it.' And Muriel looked at once relieved.

At this moment Miss Hillyard entered the room. It struck me then that she had the hushed footstep and subdued voice of one who has long ministered to a nervous invalid. In the clear morning light she looked even more wan and delicate than ever. I noticed that her eyes were somewhat sunken, and that there were dark lines under them; and I was not surprised when Muriel observed, in rather an anxious tone, 'Oh, Judith darling, how ill you look! Shall I go up to mother for a little, while you take a turn in the garden?' But Miss Hillyard shook her head.

'No, dear, I could not stay now. I only came down for a moment to speak to Miss Osborne.—My poor mother,' turning to me, 'is suffering more than usual this morning.'

'I hope you have a good doctor, Miss Hillyard?'

I saw Muriel dart a peculiar look at her sister; I had no idea what it meant; but Miss Hillyard replied hurriedly:

'We are very fortunate in that respect. There is an excellent medical man at Walton—indeed, two or three; but we like Dr. Morrison best.'

'But you have not sent for him, Judith?' Muriel spoke rather gravely, I thought.

'There was no need. I told you so, you know. I understand how to treat these attacks. You may trust me, Muriel. It would do more harm

than good to call in Dr. Morrison. But I must not stay here talking.'

She glanced at the books, and then at us, with a gentle smile, and left the room, but as the door closed Muriel pushed them away with an impatient gesture.

'Did you ever see anyone look so ill? And she is growing gray, too. Just think of growing gray at six-and-twenty! Is it not unnatural? All this nursing and shut-up life is killing her; and they will let me do nothing; even Rebecca thinks I am too young and lively to be trusted. But they will find out their mistake one day. Now let us go in the garden. When I am in this mood the house seems to oppress me; I long to make a noise or scold somebody; and then I am safer out of doors.'

I felt obliged to humour her: it was too soon to try to discipline this wayward young creature. I accompanied her into the lime avenue, where we spent the rest of the morning, talking on all sorts of desultory subjects. When I took my leave she parted from me with reluctance, and was pleased to tell me that I had done her good.

'It is so nice to have a real idle chat with someone fresh. It is like a breath of moorland air after a hot sultry day. It was almost as good as talking to a girl of my own age: some old people are so dreadfully precise and uninteresting —not that you are old, exactly, but all the same you are not young, you know.'

And then we shook hands very cordially. She had not closed the green door, and I looked back to smile and wave to her, but she did not notice me: she was standing with her hand on the hound's shaggy head, and seemed lost in deep abstraction. As I turned the corner she was still standing there motionless, with her pretty little head bent, and her eyes fixed upon the ground.

CHAPTER IV

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

A FEW days' acquaintance with Muriel Hillyard soon ripened my first feeling of interest into warmest affection: before the first week had closed, my new pupil had firmly established herself in the softest corner of my heart. No one but an ogre could have resisted those frank, child-like advances, those pretty, imperative ways. If I had found her charming at our first introduction—if her gay *insouciance* and merry laugh even then bewitched me—I was even more ready to acknowledge her fascination when day after day I learned to know her better. Certainly she was not without her faults—indeed, they were more plainly legible than most people's—but she was so affectionate, so sweet-tempered, so full of girlish graces, that it was impossible not to love her. It was

touching to see the affection between the sisters; there was something peculiarly protective and tender in Miss Hillyard's manner when she addressed her. Muriel was evidently her darling and pet—an anxious charge, perhaps, if one could judge from those grave, wistful looks that sometimes rested on her bright face, but, still, the object of her dearest solicitude, and her chief happiness. That Muriel repaid her sister's devotion was also apparent. As I watched her coaxing ways and the thousand nameless attentions that seemed her daily delight, I did not wonder to see Judith's careworn face relax and brighten.

Before I had spent many mornings at The Nook I found that Muriel could sometimes be grave. Even in those early days I noticed that she was often absent and serious. When I was playing to her, for example, instead of watching my fingers on the keys, she would be sunk in some day-dream, and if I roused her, she would start uneasily and appear confused. More than once I had detected the glimmer of a tear on her eyelid. And yet she did not appear to be unhappy. I was playing to them both one morning. Miss Hillyard had brought in her work, to be sociable, as she said; the music soothed her mother, and she was able to leave her. I was playing with much enjoyment to myself, when I saw Miss Hillyard cross the room and sit down by the chair where Muriel had ensconced herself

'What is it, darling?' I heard her say, in quite

an anxious tone. 'Why, you are actually crying, Muriel!'

I do not know what Muriel said in reply, but when I had finished the sonata, I ventured to glance round at them. Muriel's face was hidden against her sister's shoulder, and they were holding each other very tightly. The next moment Muriel rose with an unsteady laugh and went to the window. Perhaps she did not want me to see that her eyes were wet, for she stood there for some time. I was struck then with the look of anxious solicitude on Miss Hillyard's face. When Muriel opened the window and stepped out on the lawn, she said, half to herself:

'What can it mean? Muriel never cries. I never saw her shed a tear, unless there was grave cause for it. Miss Osborne,' turning to me, 'I am afraid my child is a little dull. Perhaps she is in need of some amusement. Will you ask her to drive you somewhere this afternoon? Perhaps the primroses are not all over in the Leigh woods —Muriel does so love primroses—and the little change will do her good.'

'Why should you not go yourself, Miss Hillyard? It is such a lovely day, and I am sure the drive will be of equal benefit to you.'

But she shook her head..

'Muriel needs a more cheerful companion. I am afraid she often finds me too quiet. If you have no other engagement, I should be so pleased if you would go.'

And, of course, after that, I consented.

This little episode had occurred about a fortnight after my arrival at Walton, and by that time my acquaintance with my fellow-lodger, Mr. Royston, had made great strides. I soon liked him very much, he was so gentlemanly and pleasant in his manners; and he was kind-hearted, too. For how many young men in his position would have troubled themselves to pay little attentions to a plain, middle-aged woman, a daily governess without connections or fortune? Nevertheless, Mr. Royston very soon made it evident that he appreciated my society, and meant to cultivate my acquaintance. He very soon persuaded me that it would be sinful extravagance on my part to order the *Morning Post*, when I could always share his *Standard;* and it soon became his daily habit to bring it to my room about tea-time, and linger for a few minutes' chat. I wonder if he knew how those few cheery words brightened my daily life, and imparted a comfortable sense of comradeship. I very soon learned to listen to his quick, springy footstep with a sense of pleasure; and as I sat working or reading in my room in the evening, the sound of his piano, or even his light-hearted whistling, made me feel more cheerful. He had very soon found out all about my visits to The Nook, and, though he was far too well-bred to manifest any impertinent curiosity, I noticed that any remark about Leylands seemed to interest him, and before very long I discovered that the

name had some subtle charm for him: no matter from what point our conversation started—from Gladstone, or the search for Emin Pasha—we invariably landed at Leylands. After a time, when we became more intimate, he told me a great deal about himself.

He had come in from tennis one evening, and was still in his Joseph's coat, as I called it—a gorgeous garment striped like a tiger-skin, in which he looked still more like a Roman. I had called him in to give him a cup of tea, and he had accepted it with much gratitude. He always told me that my tea was the best he ever tasted, and the little compliment had pleased me.

I do not know why our conversation became a little grave that evening, but I remember telling him how lonely I felt sometimes. He listened sympathetically, and his eyes looked at me very kindly, and then he said, rather abruptly:

'I should be in much the same case if it were not for Uncle Calvert: we are both of us miserable orphans, Miss Osborne,' with a little gleam of fun in his eyes. 'I lost my parents when I was very young. I have always lived with my uncle. He is such a good fellow! Do you know, he is only fifteen years older than I. He was a young man, not more than one-and-twenty, when they died. My grandmother was living then. I looked upon Uncle Calvert as a sort of playfellow in those days: I remember the games we had, and how he used to take me with him wherever he went,

and how people would ask him after his little brother. Well, he is older and graver now, but we still have rare sport together when I go home.'

'You live in London?'

'Yes. My uncle is a barrister; he lives in Onslow Square. His name is Grenfell. He was my mother's brother. Would you like to see his photo?'

He darted out of the room, without waiting for my answer, and returned with it a moment later.

I studied it with much interest. It was a fine, intellectual face, not handsome, but of singular power and attraction; it belonged evidently to a man in the prime of life, and in the full force of his energy; there was mingled strength and kindliness in the eyes and the broad ample brow. On the whole, I had never seen a face that pleased me better. Mr. Royston flushed in quite a boyish manner when I said this.

'Dear old fellow! He is good, every inch of him,' he said, in an enthusiastic way.

'I suppose Mr. Grenfell is married?'

But, to my surprise, Mr. Royston shook his head.

'I wish he were! No man living ever deserved a wife more; but,' looking exceeding grave, 'he has been jilted. I don't know the rights of it. It was not so many years ago. I was at Oxford when it happened, and I never even knew the girl's name. I found him awfully changed when I got back. I never saw a man so cut up. Not

that he said so; he hardly even alluded to it. "I have had a blow, my boy," he said once when I bothered him; "but it never mends matters to set up a howl over them. I meant to have got married like the rest of the world, but she has changed her mind—that is all." And he never said another word about it; but he has not been the same since. Poor old man! it has gone hard with him, I know. If only I could speak my mind to that girl!' And here Mr. Royston's eyes flashed. My young Roman had plenty of spirit in him. I should pity any woman who dared to play him false.

Muriel and I had begun our sketching expeditions. Miss Hillyard had demurred a little at first; she said it was taking an unfair advantage of my good-nature and robbing me of my leisure. But I soon undeceived her on this point. I enjoyed myself quite as much as Muriel did. I loved to be in the open air, I was fond of sketching, and I liked the society of my young companion. When Miss Hillyard found I was in earnest, she withdrew her opposition, and delighted in filling a little basket with delicacies for our refreshment. What interest Mousquetaire took in that basket! He now came invariably with me to the house in the mornings, and, as Hector treated him from the first with a sort of contemptuous tolerance, my wee doggie led a very happy life indeed.

Our first afternoon had been successful in every

way. On the second a curious thing happened. We were some distance from Leylands, and were trying to do justice to a picturesque group of cottages with some beech-trees behind them and a delicious bit of ivy-draped wall, when Mousquetaire uttered a friendly bark, and Mr. Royston passed, walking very slowly. I looked up and nodded to him, and he at once paused, as though he expected me to speak to him. Glancing at Muriel, I saw that her head was bent very low over her sketch; she seemed intent on her work, so I smiled and made signs that he must not disturb us, and he at once took the hint and walked on; but I thought he looked disappointed, and in the evening he hinted in a grumbling sort of way at the exclusiveness of English manners.

'Come, come, Mr. Royston,' I said, for I perfectly understood him; 'I am sure you know one Englishwoman who has no nonsense of that sort. But I was in office this afternoon, remember; my pupil was beside me, so only a nod and smile were permissible. Do you suppose any woman in my responsible position would allow herself to bandy words with a young man? What would Miss Hillyard have said if I had permitted such a wolf in sheep's clothing to be brought into contact with her sister?'

'I should not have hurt either of you,' he said, a little sulkily; 'and the country is different from [illegible]ndon.'

[illegible]uman nature is the same everywhere,' I

returned dryly; 'for even pattern young men have to be kept in order sometimes. Besides, under the present circumstances I am bound to be especially wary; the Miss Hillyards hold themselves aloof from everybody.'

'But why?' he asked eagerly. 'Do you know, people tell me—of course, there is plenty of gossip in these small places; everyone knows everybody else's business, so I have heard about these ladies—people say that they live like nuns, and that no one ever visits at The Nook? Do you know the reason? Excuse me if I seem inquisitive, but it does appear so incredible — two such beautiful girls, too.'

'Mrs. Hillyard has such dreadful health.'

'Do you believe that is the only reason?' he returned, in such a peculiar tone that I looked at him in surprise. 'Could any mother not utterly selfish condemn that young creature—creatures, I mean—to such an unnatural life? It is monstrous! It is not life at all; it—you must see it yourself, Miss Osborne. I am sure you must be grieved for them. Just think! you are the only lady, besides the Vicar's wife, who has ever been inside The Nook—and I believe she has only been once; her reception certainly did not induce her to repeat her visit.'

'The Vicar's wife?'

'Yes; Mrs. Mostyn, up at Leyland Hall. I know her slightly; she is a very pleasant woman. She quite raved about the elder Miss Hillyard's

beauty, but she said she was the proudest and most repellent person she had ever seen; that she was made to feel in a civil sort of way that her visit was unexpected and by no means desired. She gave me a graphic account of it. The second Miss Hillyard—your pupil—never made her appearance at all; but she has seen her running in and out of the cottages, and evidently quite friendly with the inmates.'

'I think after your account you will fully exonerate me from unfriendliness this afternoon, Mr. Royston.' But at this he turned a little obstinate.

'That was altogether different. I don't see why Miss Hillyard—your pupil, I mean—need be held responsible for her sister's hauteur. What would a few words spoken on the highroad have mattered to anyone? Like many other women, you are overscrupulous.' And with that he went off; but I did not hear him whistle for the remainder of the evening. My pattern young man certainly had a temper.

I thought he would have given us a wide berth after that, but somehow we were always meeting him; he never lingered or seemed to expect me to address him, but walked straight on in a business-like way. When he took off his hat to us, Muriel bowed very gravely, but she always flushed a little, as though she were aware that we were followed.

When this had gone on for a little, I determined

to lecture him severely, and I opened the subject by asking him in a sarcastic voice if he had left off playing tennis.

'By no means,' he replied, undaunted by this; 'but I was always a great walker; Uncle Calvert would tell you that.' And then, reading mischief in my eyes, he added coolly: 'I believe the Leigh woods and Wimborne are not private property, and the highroad is broad enough to hold more than two people.' And, seeing him in this dangerous mood, and only too ready to show fight, I adroitly changed the subject, to his manifest triumph.

'After all,' I said to myself, 'young men will be young men, and a pretty face will lure them to the world's end. What is the good of going against nature, you silly woman? If Mr. Royston admires your pupil, what business is that of yours, as long as you permit no attempt on his part to secure an introduction? On that point you must be firm; the line must be drawn there.' And this mental resolve pacified me.

After all, he had other opportunities. What deep creatures men are! I was led to this remark one Sunday evening. Muriel had once asked me to come to their little church: 'It is such a nice service for a village, and Mr. Mostyn preaches so beautifully,' she added coaxingly.

Acting on this hint, I walked over one evening, and as I took my place behind Muriel and her sister, I saw Mr. Royston in a pew near us. I

thought he looked rather shamefaced, as though he were found out, but I took no apparent notice of him. When the service had ended, he waited in his place until Miss Hillyard and Muriel had passed, and then he followed them closely. I lingered for a few minutes to inspect the little church. When I came out he was walking rapidly down the road before me. What had he been doing with himself all that time? He certainly had not waited to offer me his escort, because, though he turned his head and saw me following him up the beech avenue, he did not attempt to join me, but walked on as though for a wager, and I did not see him again that night.

CHAPTER V

A LATE VISITOR

A MONTH had passed in this manner tranquilly and happily. After that Sunday evening I carefully refrained from any further attendance at the little church at Leylands: Mr. Royston need not fear that I should be a spy upon his movements. Nevertheless, I was well aware that he never missed the evening service.

One morning, as Muriel and I were reading French together, Miss Hillyard came into the room a little hurriedly. I thought she looked nervous.

'May I venture to interrupt you?' she asked, in rather a deprecating voice. 'Muriel, will you spare Miss Osborne for a few minutes? Mother wishes to see her.' Muriel opened her eyes very widely at this. I think she was as surprised as I was at this announcement. 'Mother?' she repeated, in an incredulous tone; but Miss Hillyard hardly glanced at her. 'My mother cannot talk much,' she continued, addressing me; 'she will not detain you long, if you will be kind enough to follow me.' I rose at once, and for the first time ascended the staircase. The steps were low and broad, and the carved balustrades were dark with age. I heard afterwards that The Nook had once been a dower-house, and that many generations of elderly Mostyns had ended their peaceful existence there. No doubt this accounted for the taste and air of finish that stamped the interior of The Nook.

When we reached the landing Miss Hillyard paused, and I again noticed that she seemed extremely nervous.

'I dare say you are used to invalids, Miss Osborne,' she said, looking at me anxiously. 'If my mother seems a little abrupt or strange, I am sure you will be kind enough to take no notice; her illness is of the nerves, and we are sometimes obliged to humour her.'

She drew back the curtain that hung before a door as she spoke, and signed to me to enter. I found myself in a large, handsomely-furnished

room, with two windows overlooking the garden, the apartment evidently serving as a sitting-room as well as a bedroom.

The venetian blinds of one window had been closed to exclude the May sunshine, and a tall Indian screen had been drawn around the easy-chair where the invalid sat. It was not until I was within a few feet of her that I had any clear perception of her features, but the first sight of Mrs. Hillyard was a shock to me. As she held out a cold, trembling hand and touched mine, I thought that if it were not for her eyes I might be looking at the face of a dead woman. Her very resemblance to her daughter seemed to heighten the ghastly effect; a Judith stricken with age and palsy might have sat in that chair. Even the first glance told me that Judith's beauty had been inherited from her mother; nothing could be finer than the features, and the dark, sunken eyes had no doubt once been brilliant with the light of youth. I had seen many sufferers in my life, and had held more than one dying hand, but never had I looked upon a more piteous wreck of mind and body.

'She looks kind, Judith,' she whispered, drawing her hand away, however, in rather a frightened manner as she felt my warm touch. 'You are right; she has a true face.'

'Yes, dear'—soothingly, as though she were speaking to a child; but she looked at me as though entreating my forbearance. 'You know

you can trust me, mother. I am never mistaken in a face; I was sure Miss Osborne would prove a good friend to us all. You have grown very fond of Muriel, have you not?' appealing to me; but Mrs. Hillyard interrupted her somewhat fretfully:

'What do we want with friends, Judith? Only people who are happy can afford to indulge in such luxuries. We have each other and Rebecca. We have given up the world, you know, before it has given us up.'

'Hush, dearest mother,' laying her thin hand on the invalid's shoulder. 'What will Miss Osborne think if you talk so wildly?'

'Ah! that is just it; what will she think, Judith?' And the frightened look deepened in her eyes. 'You are terribly incautious; all young people are. You promised me that we should be quite quiet here. Muriel is only a child. What does she want with a finishing governess? In my time girls were content with a good solid education.'

'Muriel is eighteen, mother.'

'Eighteen? Nonsense! You must have made a mistake. I was married at that age.' A new fear evolved from her sick fancies seemed to disturb her. 'Judith, have you told this lady that young men are not allowed here? Have you asked her to keep strict watch over the child? Muriel must not be allowed to make acquaintance with any gentleman, or evil will come of it, as it did in your case, Jue.'

Miss Hillyard turned suddenly very pale, then she stooped and whispered some remonstrance into her mother's ear; but the invalid listened to her with a sort of childish fretfulness.

'Why did you let her come up, then?' she returned peevishly. 'You know I dislike strangers, and never know what to say to them. It is quite your own fault, Judith.'

I saw a weary, despairing look pass over Miss Hillyard's face; then she turned to me, and, with her usual air of gentle courtesy, begged me to take my leave, as the interview evidently fatigued her mother.

I thought Mrs. Hillyard seemed a little sullen at her daughter's rebuke, for she did not again give me her hand.

'It is all Judith's fault; she spoils that child,' we heard her say as we left the room.

Miss Hillyard paused on the threshold.

'Please do not mind anything she has said,' she whispered. 'The sight of a stranger always bewilders her; when we are alone she is much calmer. Strangers seem to have a disturbing influence. She has had a great shock; the doctor says it will be years before she recovers from it.'

Just then a fretful call sounded from the room, and she motioned me to go quickly. The door was still ajar—perhaps in her haste Miss Hillyard had forgotten to shut it—and as I went downstairs I could hear the invalid's querulous tones:

'It has done me harm, Judith; I tell you it has done me harm. Everything hurts me, and I shall have another attack to-night. Why did you let her come up? I have said something I ought not to have said, and it is all your fault—all your fault.'

And then the door closed.

Muriel looked at me inquisitively as I re-entered the room.

'You have not been long,' she remarked. 'What do you think of poor mother? Does she not look very, very ill?'

I answered in the affirmative, but I could not be induced to repeat her mother's conversation, and I could see that my reserve somewhat disappointed Muriel; she wanted to know my impressions.

'I wonder why she wished to see you,' she continued in a dissatisfied tone. 'She has never asked for anyone before. It seems so very strange.'

'Perhaps your sister can tell you that.'

'Judith never tells me anything, or Rebecca either; they all persist, even mother, in treating me like a child; but they will find out their mistake some day. I am no child.' She threw up her pretty little head, and her long neck curved like a swan's, and there was a naughty sparkle in her eyes. 'Perhaps they thought you were not strict enough for a duenna, Miss Osborne, so they determined to lecture you in private,' continued

the young lady. 'I declare, I begin to feel like an imprisoned princess—like that king's daughter, for example, who was shut up in a brazen tower; only in fairy tales it always ends so happily.'

'To be sure, there is always a prince in those stories,' I returned coolly.

My remark seemed to take Muriel back; she blushed violently, and then pointed out the lateness of the hour, as though she were anxious to get rid of me, and I took the hint at once.

But I never enjoyed my homeward walk less, and even the soft lights and shadows that flecked my favourite beech avenue only raised a momentary admiration. A haggard, weary face, with dark, miserable eyes, seemed to come between me and the sunlight—a haunting face, worn with some strange, secret pain. Was Mrs. Hillyard's mind disordered, or had weakness and grief only bewildered it, as her daughter had said? Good heavens! What a life for a girl of six-and-twenty, to minister to this diseased mind! Was it any marvel that Judith's cheek had grown so thin, that she habitually wore that expression of hopeless, gentle patience? How long, her sad eyes seemed to ask—how long must she carry this daily cross? Alas! what could have caused this dreadful illness? A shock? But it could have been no light shock. I was so lost in these thoughts that I never noticed that I had reached my own gate, and that Mr. Royston and another gentleman were just coming out. I believe I

should have passed them without looking up, only Mr. Royston's laugh recalled me.

'Do you know that you are passing your own door?' he observed in a quizzical tone. Then, as I looked rather foolish, he continued, 'It was cruel of me to disturb such profound meditation, but I particularly wished to introduce my uncle to you.'

So this was his uncle Calvert. I should have recognised Mr. Grenfell in a moment without any introduction. The same thoughtful, intelligent face that I had seen in the photograph was looking at me now with a pleasant smile.

'I have heard a great deal of Miss Osborne. I am glad my nephew has such a kind neighbour,' he said, as we shook hands.

'We have formed a sort of mutual improvement society,' interposed Mr. Royston gaily. 'Miss Osborne gives me tea—such tea, Uncle Calvert! old Dorothy's is not to be compared to it—and I contribute a vast amount of useful conversation; so we are quits.'

'Are you going away, Mr. Royston?' with an inquiring glance at the Gladstone bag he carried.

'Yes; I have got an exeat, and am going to run up to London for two days.'

'I think we ought to be off now, Bryan, or we shall be late for the train,' interposed Mr. Grenfell; and then they took leave of me.

I watched them for a moment. They were

both tall men, and I noticed Mr. Grenfell had the same fine carriage of the head and shoulders that distinguished his nephew. He was not handsome, certainly, but he had the sort of face that it is impossible to forget. I fancied that his manner was habitually grave.

The house felt a little dull without Mr. Royston; there were no snatches of piano-playing, no whistling, no springing footsteps on the staircase, no tap at my door when the tea-tray made its appearance. To make matters worse, it was a wet evening; torrents of rain fell and beat drearily against the window-panes, as though lashed by an angry wind. As I sat by my snug fire and listened to the storm without, an unusual restlessness oppressed me; perhaps my interview with Mrs. Hillyard had had a depressing influence; but, in spite of all my efforts to fix my attention on my book, I found my thoughts travelling back to The Nook; Judith's careworn face came between me and the page and hindered all enjoyment.

I had sunk into a deep reverie, when I heard the gate close, and a minute afterwards the door-bell rang. Who could have ventured out on such a wild night? Probably one of the masters had come for an hour's smoke and chat with Mr. Royston: he seemed a great favourite with them all, and generally one or other of his friends invaded his evening solitude. I heard Miss Trotter's voice raised in shrill remonstrance; then there

was a hurried tap at my door, and Judith's pale face appeared in the doorway.

I sprang from my chair with an exclamation of surprise.

'My dear Miss Hillyard, how imprudent, how excessively wrong to come out on such an evening! You are wet; your cloak is soaking.'

But she motioned me back.

'Please don't touch me. Of course I must be wet; it has rained heavily all the time. Poor Hector is wet, too. Do you think Miss Trotter will mind him lying on the doormat? I could not leave him outside.'

'He shall come in and dry himself at my fire. He will not hurt my old rug.'

Then, as she thanked me and took off her long waterproof cloak, I stirred up the fire and drew up the easy-chair. Hector looked at me gratefully as he shook himself and lay down in the warmest corner, a proceeding that Mousquetaire evidently resented, for he at once curled himself up on the couch and sulked for the remainder of the evening.

Miss Hillyard followed me. She sat down somewhat silently, and stretched out her thin hands to the fire, as though the warmth was pleasant to her. I thought she looked paler than usual, and, though she did not speak, she glanced at me once or twice rather nervously. To put her at her ease, I said cheerfully:

'A visitor is an unexpected pleasure this evening. It was rather dull work listening to the rain, and

for once in my life I found my own company somewhat irksome.'

'I was envying you as I came in,' she returned, somewhat sadly. 'You looked so content sitting by your peaceful fireside, while other people were battling with the wind and rain.'

'Other people ought to have remained by their fireside, too,' was my pointed rejoinder to this; but the little rebuke passed unheeded.

'Miss Osborne,' she said hurriedly, 'you are very kind. You are the sort of person that one can trust. I have come out to-night to ask you a favour—a great favour. I am in a little perplexity, and the worst of it is that I cannot explain things. I know Miss Trotter has another room—there will be no difficulty about that—but would it trouble you very much if Muriel were to come here for two or three days?'

'Come here? Stay with me, do you mean?'

'Yes. Of course, she could not be here alone, but with you she would be safe—quite safe. There is no one else of whom I could ask such a favour; but Muriel is so fond of you. You have already proved yourself such a kind friend to us both, that I have ventured to ask this.'

'My dear Miss Hillyard, I shall be delighted. You will be conferring a favour on me by allowing me to enjoy your sister's society. When do you wish her to come? Any day will be the same to me. This is not The Nook, but I will promise to make her as comfortable as the house will allow.'

'I do not doubt her comfort. Thank you so much, Miss Osborne. May she come to you to-morrow morning? It will be only for a day or two; but her room is wanted, and there are reasons'—with a painful return of nervousness.

A quick thought darted into my mind. Mr. Royston—he was away now, but he would surely be back on Monday. How was I to speak of him without betraying his unspoken confidence? Miss Hillyard knew that one of the masters lived in the house: more than once I had mentioned his name. I remembered telling her one day that we were great friends.

Perhaps she saw my embarrassment, for she asked me rather quickly if Muriel would inconvenience me in any way.

'No, it is not that,' I replied. 'I shall be too delighted to have her. I was only wondering what I was to do about Mr. Royston. He has gone up to London to-day, but he will be back in a day or two. He has got into the habit of coming to my room for a chat or a cup of tea, and I shall find it difficult to turn him out.'

I could see that this was an unexpected difficulty. A slight frown contracted her forehead; she seemed at a loss how to answer me.

'Perhaps I might give him a hint,' I suggested, 'that while Muriel is with me his visits will not be as welcome as usual. He is very observant: I should think the merest hint would suffice.'

By which speech I showed a pitiful ignorance

of the ways of young men. Mr. Royston might be observant, but what if he did not choose to take the hint? Bessie Osborne, after all, you are a very foolish woman!

Miss Hillyard looked very much relieved when I said this. Her puckered brow smoothed again.

'If you will be so extremely kind—if you will be good enough to give this hint to Mr. Royston, I shall feel more comfortable. Muriel is very young, and we are anxious for her not to form any new acquaintance at present. I hope you will not find the charge too difficult; but it is only for a day or two.'

'Yes; and Mr. Royston will be away until Monday.'

'In that case it will not matter in the least. I shall not ask you to keep her beyond Monday or Tuesday — perhaps Tuesday. I am very glad things have happened so. And now thank you again. You have taken a load off my mind.'

And she smiled at me gratefully as she rose.

'You are not going yet?'

'Yes, indeed. Do you know how late it is? But I am thankful to hear the rain is falling less heavily. Come, Hector, old fellow, we must tramp through the mud again.'

I knew that it was useless to say a dissuading word. The dog was certainly a protection on that lonely road, but it troubled me to see that delicate young creature—for she was young, after all — expose herself to the inclement weather.

When I opened the door the rush of damp air seemed to chill one, and, though Miss Hillyard was right and the rain had somewhat abated, there was still a steady, quiet downpour that threatened to last for hours.

My lips were sealed, but I think she saw the pitying disapproval in my face, for as she drew the hood of her cloak over her head, she suddenly bent forward with a sort of impulse and kissed me.

'Do not look so sorry,' she said gently. 'Hector will take care of me; and I was obliged to come, in spite of the rain. Go in and warm yourself, dear Miss Osborne!'

But I did nothing of the kind; on the contrary, I went down to the gate, and stood by the dripping hedge and watched her out of sight. How weird it looked, that slender hooded figure walking so swiftly under the black skies, with the hound stalking solemnly beside her? Had she no fear of that dark, long road? How I wished Mr. Royston were at home, that he might follow her even at a distance!

I went back to the house with a vague uneasiness stirring in my mind. I was a very scrupulous person, and I felt as though I were deceiving Miss Hillyard—as though I had only given her a half-confidence. What would she have said if she knew how Mr. Royston haunted Leylands—how he made it his daily object to track our movements? Would she have entrusted Muriel

to my care if she had known this? But I quieted my scruples by telling myself that Mr. Royston would not be back until Monday. After all, the risk was slight; I would take care to be out all that afternoon, and perhaps by Tuesday she would have returned to The Nook. When my mind was clear on this point, I called in Miss Trotter, and gave her instructions about preparing a room for my young guest. It seemed to me as though she were unduly surprised at the news; her sentences became involved, and gave me a good deal of trouble to disentangle any sort of meaning from them.

'Dear me! One of the Miss Hillyards!' she kept repeating. 'What an unexpected circumstance!'

And she kept up this running fire of astonished comment until I dismissed her.

CHAPTER VI

THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

THE next morning Muriel drove up in the pony-carriage. She was evidently in a state of suppressed excitement, of which wonder seemed the predominant feature, and which she carefully repressed until Miss Trotter was out of hearing.

'What does it mean?' she observed, in a

perplexed voice, as she took off her hat. 'I never knew Judith so mysterious, so altogether provoking and tiresome; she goes about the house looking like a ghost, and refusing to open her lips. It is almost enough to drive one crazy! Some gentleman is coming down on business—that is all she tells me—and my room is wanted.'

'My dear Muriel,' I interposed soothingly, 'that is surely sufficient reason to satisfy any reasonable person. Do you mind so very much giving up your room for a night or two?'

'Not in the least,' she returned promptly. 'I am only too delighted to get away from The Nook for a few hours. One may love one's home, and yet have too much of it.'

'Then why do you look so discomposed?' for she certainly seemed vexed and a little perturbed.

'Well, I will tell you'—after a moment's hesitation, during which her forehead seemed a mass of wrinkles, so that her pretty brown hair nearly touched her eyebrows. 'I hate mysteries!' bringing out the words with such force and suddenness that Mousquetaire jumped up and licked her face.

'But if there be no mystery?' I returned coolly —'if your sister really wants your room——'

But she interrupted me:

'Why can she not put the man, whoever he is, into the spare room? What does it matter if it

is dismantled? Rebecca and the girl would soon make it comfortable. I would have slept in it myself—it would have been a change. I should have felt like the Vicar of Wakefield migrating from the blue bed to the brown,' continued Muriel, with a little humour. 'But Judith would not hear of it; she declared the room was damp. But, of course, I know what she meant. It is the old story; I am too young to be trusted, so I am to be sent out of the way.'

What could I say? In my heart I agreed with her, but it would never do to let her think so. But in another minute her mood changed; she laughed, winked away a suspicious moisture that was gathering in her bright eyes, and kissed me affectionately.

'Don't look so worried, you dear thing! I have no right to air my little troubles in this way. Judith may be as mysterious as she likes, and I do not mean to vex myself any more about her. We will have a good time together, and I intend to enjoy myself tremendously.'

She seemed her bright self after this, though she had another grave fit before the morning was over. I wondered if it had anything to do with a casual remark that I made about Mr. Royston's absence, and which she received with complete silence; but her face gave me no clue, and a few minutes afterwards she proposed a sketching-expedition for the afternoon.

We spent Sunday quietly, and went to the

parish church. I was afraid my young companion attracted a great deal of notice; she was certainly pretty, and there was something so fresh and piquante about her whole appearance that I was not surprised to see that the younger members of the congregation looked at her rather curiously.

On Monday morning, as we were at breakfast, a note was brought to me by a boy. It was from Miss Hillyard, and was evidently written in great haste. She had some troublesome business to settle, and she begged me to keep Muriel a little longer.

'I am afraid you will think me very unceremonious, dear Miss Osborne,' she wrote, 'but I am placed in a very difficult position. Will you let Muriel stay with you for two or three days longer? When I am ready for her I will drive over and fetch her myself, and then I shall have an opportunity of thanking you for your kindness.'

I had expected a return of Muriel's petulance when I acquainted her with the contents of her sister's note, but, to my surprise, she looked excessively pleased.

'I do like staying with you so much,' she said, in her most winning way; 'and you don't want to get rid of me, do you?'

But, though I could truthfully assure her of this,

my pleasure in her society was a little dashed by the idea of my responsibility. I could only plan sketching-expeditions that should keep us out the whole afternoon: if Mr. Royston missed his afternoon tea he must endure his disappointment.

It is strange how one's plans are frustrated. That very afternoon we were detained indoors by a settled drizzling rain; when Miss Trotter brought in the tea-things she lighted the fire, just to keep the damp out, as she said, and make up for the want of sunshine, and, as I dearly loved the cheerful blaze, I made no objection. Muriel curled herself up on the rug at once; she said that it made her feel more at home; she told me that she often spent the whole evening in that position with her head in Judith's lap, either reading or talking. 'It is dreadfully idle, but it is so comfortable,' she added, with a sigh as though she were missing that dearly-loved sister.

Just then I heard the gate close with a bang, and the next moment the latch-key turned with the well-known click. I think Muriel heard it too, for the cheek that was farthest from the fire became very pink.

Of course it was Mr. Royston: no one else would throw down his Gladstone bag with such a thud, or race upstairs three steps at a time. Before I could recover my breath or think what was to be done, he was down again and rapping at my door. Muriel started. 'Who is it?' she asked, a little fearfully; but of course she knew who it was. But

Mr. Royston was evidently taken by surprise: he stood in the doorway as if he were petrified when he saw the girlish figure on the hearthrug.

'Well, come in,' I said, a little pettishly, for the difficulty of the position put me out of temper, and I was even inclined to quarrel with Judith and her mysteries. 'I suppose you want a cup of tea after your journey, Mr. Royston? You see I have my pupil with me, Miss Hillyard. This is my fellow-lodger, Mr. Royston.'

'Yes, I know,' she answered, in a very low voice, as she gave him her hand without looking at him. As for Mr. Royston, the flash of joy that came into his eyes would have betrayed his secret to the most casual observer. For the moment he was incapable of a word.

Muriel certainly did not help him out of his embarrassment. She came round to my side very silently, and seemed absorbed in my movements; even when Mr. Royston placed himself opposite to her she did not seem inclined to look at him and address him, and the whole burden of the conversation fell on me.

I was rather partial to young men—at least, when they were clever and amusing; but I felt that afternoon that I could cheerfully have dispensed with Mr. Royston's society. He did not seem to notice my stiffness and want of cordiality; he was very absent, and answered my remarks in rather a random manner, as though his thoughts were otherwise engaged. Perhaps the pretty,

blushing face opposite him was a little too distracting, or very likely he wished that he could induce its owner to take some part in the conversation.

He addressed her at last:

'Did you and Miss Osborne attend evening service at Leylands, Miss Hillyard?'

'No,' she returned, with unusual shyness—Muriel was not a shy person—'we went to the parish church.'

'Indeed!' fixing his eyes on her.

'One likes a change sometimes,' she returned, plucking up a little of her old spirit. 'One gets so tired of doing the same things day after day.'

'And of seeing the same faces'—in rather a peculiar tone.

'Miss Osborne,' observed Muriel, 'Mousquetaire is begging for his tea, and you are taking no notice of him. May I give him some sponge-cake?'

Muriel's cheeks wore a deeper pink as she spoke, and I think she was trying to hide a smile.

I confess my feelings were not altogether pleasant. Those two young people evidently understood each other. Had Mr. Royston ever spoken to her before? There was something in his manner that made me uneasy; the same quiet power that was stamped on his uncle's face was visible on his: in spite of his youth, he was a man who would be likely to hew his way through every obstacle.

So he stayed on now, without taking any notice of my hints, though I tried hard to get rid of him. Muriel told me afterwards that I had been extremely rude to him: we were sitting in the dusk, and she was on the rug at my feet again.

'Do you always treat your guests so ungraciously?' she asked, with a fine assumption of innocence, as though the naughty child did not know that I had sat on thorns for two hours, for Mr. Royston certainly stayed quite that time. 'I was very sorry for the poor man once or twice when you took him up so sharply.'

'Mr. Royston had no right to stay so long when I showed him so plainly that I wished him to go. I never knew him so inconsiderate before.'

'Really?' with a drawl; for even Muriel could be provoking sometimes. I determined to punish her promptly.

'I think you might have seconded me,' I returned, rather severely. 'Mr. Royston would not have stayed so long if you had not questioned him so closely about his visit to the Engadine.'

For after a time Muriel had thrown off her shyness and had shown a willingness to converse on any or every subject. But my reproof fell harmlessly.

'Of course one likes to have one's questions answered,' she returned calmly, 'and I was always so anxious for information about the Engadine.

I mean to go there myself one day. Mr. Royston has promised to lend me his Baedeker; and he has some lovely photographs, too.'

'Muriel,' I observed, a little too abruptly—but really these young people had been terribly trying—'I cannot allow you to form any acquaintance with Mr. Royston while you are under my care. You know your sister would not wish it.'

For a moment I thought she was going to be very angry; her face darkened, and she seemed on the point of breaking out into an indignant remonstrance; then she turned very pale, and her eyelids drooped.

'Very well,' was all her reply.

My severity softened in a moment.

'You know, my dear,' I continued more gently, 'that I would not hurt you for the world, or Mr. Royston, either: he is a great favourite of mine. But I am in rather an onerous position. Your sister tells me plainly that she wishes you to form no new acquaintance at present, and Mr. Royston is only like other young men; he likes to be civil and pay attention to a pretty girl—they all do; but while you are my guest it is impossible for me to encourage his visits. Are you sure that you do not misunderstand me?'

'It is very easy to understand,' she returned, a little proudly. 'You are stating it with sufficient plainness.'

'And you will own I am right?'

'From your own point of view, I dare say you are right.'

And she could not be induced to say another word on the subject. She was not quite like herself all the evening, though from the way she kissed me when she said good-night I could see she bore me no malice for my plain speaking.

I wished that I could be more lenient with them both. After all, Mr. Royston was a gentleman, and in a fairly good position; besides his mastership, he had two hundred a year of his own, and doubtless his uncle would leave him his money. Was it not the most natural thing in the world that he should have fallen in love with this charming girl? How I wished that I could help and not thwart him! I was too soft-hearted for the character I had to play; if they had only known it, they had my best wishes and sympathy.

Muriel seemed quite herself when we met at breakfast; the morning passed pleasantly, and she made no objection when I proposed taking our sketch-books to Farnborough, a village some three miles off. It was six o'clock when we returned, and we found the dreaded visitor had called during our absence: the table was strewn with photograph-books, and Baedeker occupied a prominent position. We saw nothing of Mr. Royston that night, and Muriel spent the evening in poring over the photograph-albums and studying Baedeker.

I congratulated myself on my successful ruse, and the next afternoon I suggested another expedition. I thought Muriel acceded a little reluctantly this time; she was tired of sketching, she said, with a touch of petulance; but when I persisted she shrugged her shoulders, and offered no further opposition; but I had rather a silent companion that afternoon. Nothing went right; Muriel was inattentive to my instructions, and spoiled her sketch; then she got cross and refused to touch her pencil again—she would rather sit and watch me. I found the silence irksome; Muriel's girlish spleen seemed to spoil the sunshine; nevertheless, I worked on steadily until I felt that it would be safe to return. This time a beautiful bouquet greeted our eyes as we entered the room.

At the sight of the flowers Muriel's ill humour vanished. Her sister, too, had sent quite a hamper of good things—chickens, new-laid eggs and cream, and cakes.

'Evidently Judith thinks you will starve me,' observed Muriel, with her old merry smile. 'Rebecca has made these cakes. She is a famous cook.'

A note had accompanied the hamper, but there was no word of recall. Muriel did not seem to expect it: she only remarked that she felt quite settled and at home.

From that day Mr. Royston was in my good graces: he behaved admirably. Perhaps, after

all, he had taken my hints, for though the weather obliged us to stay indoors the two following afternoons, we saw nothing of him, and only heard the sound of his piano through the closed doors. That he was mindful of us was equally evident, as each morning a box of lovely flowers, the choicest productions of Covent Garden, found a place on the breakfast-table; it had no address, the lid was open, and the flowers were there ready to be arranged.

'They are very beautiful. Did you ever see such roses?' I said once. 'I wonder if they are for you or me, Muriel?'

'For you, of course,' she returned, giving the box a little push, but there was a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

Of course the little puss knew they were for her, though, as she filled the vases and made dainty little breast-knots for us both, she still persisted in calling them mine.

'Why don't you go and thank him?' she said, as she touched the buds lovingly. 'You don't deserve to have such kind friends. When people send you lovely hot-house flowers that must have cost a great deal of money, you ought to say thank you, surely.'

Muriel's words were only an echo of my own thoughts. When the third box of flowers made its appearance, I left the room at once and tapped at Mr. Royston's door. He was just finishing his breakfast. When he saw me he looked a

little conscious, and a dusky red came to his cheek.

'I thought you had made up your mind not to speak to me again,' he said, shaking hands, though, with his usual heartiness.

'Nonsense!' was my blunt answer; 'you thought nothing of the kind; but all the same, I have come to scold you. Mr. Royston, how can you reconcile such extravagance with your conscience? Do you know my room is a perfect bower of roses?'

'How can I know anything of the kind,' he returned coolly, 'when your door has been so inhospitably closed to me?'

'It is only closed to you while my pupil remains under my care. Come, Mr. Royston, you shall not pretend to misunderstand an old friend; you know my reason as well as I do myself. But I cannot and will not have you waste your money in this absurd fashion.'

'How are you to help it?' he replied nonchalantly. 'If you and Miss Hillyard object to my flowers, you can just pitch them out of the window.'

Of course, it was no good arguing with him; I saw that he meant to continue his floral persecution.

'Yes,' he continued, as though he read my thoughts, 'I am deaf to remonstrances, impervious to rebukes. Nevertheless, I am open to bribes—an invitation to tea, for example, or——' Then,

catching sight of my face, 'Poor Miss Osborne, it is a shame to tease you when you are so dreadfully in earnest! You are not quite cut out for this rôle, are you? It is quite ageing you. Well, I cannot undertake to be a good boy, but I will promise to keep off the premises until the magical hour of afternoon tea is over; so please do not keep your poor pupil out of doors until she is ready to drop with fatigue. Come, you may trust me as far as that; but no further'—rather under his voice, but I heard him.

We parted with this understanding, and I was relieved to see that he bore me no grudge for my want of hospitality. The flowers came regularly, and Muriel was never without her favourite breast-knot of roses. I am afraid Mr. Royston saw them as he passed to and from his work. Occasionally we encountered him in the hall or in the street, and then he invariably accosted us. These little interviews never troubled me; I was always quite willing that they should meet in this accidental manner, so long as Mr. Royston kept away from my room; and as the days passed by, and there was still no word from Miss Hillyard, I was thankful that Mr. Royston and I had come to an understanding.

CHAPTER VII

'WE HAVE MADE A MISTAKE'

WALTON certainly agreed with Muriel; she looked prettier and happier every day.

One thing I noticed with surprise—that she was always tired in the evening, and seemed glad when I announced that bedtime had arrived. More than once she seemed overpowered with drowsiness, and made many apologies for being such a stupid companion. I used to rally her sometimes on her capacity for sleep.

'If you were an early riser, I could understand your drowsiness,' I said once, as I lighted her candle; 'but you have often told me that nothing will drag you out of your bed before half past seven.'

I was surprised to see her colour and bite her lip, as though my little speech annoyed her, and she took the candlestick from me rather hastily; but I only smiled at her touchiness.

The next morning I woke early. When this was the case, I never lingered in bed; so when Miss Trotter brought in my hot water at the usual time, she found me dressed and sitting by the open window.

'Dear me,' she observed, 'folks are all up betimes this morning! There's Mr. Royston has

been out of his room for the last hour; came down in his slippers, too. "Must not disturb the ladies, eh, Miss Trotter?" So kind and thoughtful; few young gentlemen so considerate; no early school; must be taking a walk; a fine healthy habit for young people, eh, ma'am?'

I hardly know what I answered. A sudden thought—a fear—had come into my mind. I waited breathlessly until Miss Trotter's short steps had pattered along the passage, then I ran downstairs and knocked loudly at Muriel's door—her room was just underneath mine. There was no answer. I opened the door. One glance showed me that the room was empty, and a brief search convinced me that her sailor hat and a certain jacket she wore were also missing. I sank down on a chair, quite overcome by this discovery. I had no doubt in my mind that she had gone out with the intention of meeting Mr. Royston. These early morning walks would quite explain her weariness in the evening. This was not the first time she had met him; I felt convinced of that. I was so wounded by the thought of this deception, so bitterly hurt and disappointed at this want of rectitude and proper feeling on Muriel's part, so altogether absorbed with these painful reflections, that I sat there quite oblivious of time, and only the sound of the opening door roused me. Of course it was Muriel. For one moment I watched her unperceived. I saw her take a cluster of wild-brier roses from her dress

and kiss them tenderly, while a smile almost infantine in its sweetness came to her lips; then she turned, and at the sight of my face the smile died away.

'Muriel, where have you been?' Then, as she coloured violently, and seemed taken aback at this unexpected question, I went on sorrowfully: 'Is it possible that you and Mr. Royston could have arranged this? My dear, you must answer me. Appearances are terribly against you.' Then, as her continued silence gave assent, 'Oh, Muriel, Muriel, how could you deceive me in this way? I could not have believed it of you, or of him, either.'

For one moment she looked touched and sorry; then she raised her head in her pretty, imperious way.

'Yes, I have been walking with him,' she returned, panting a little; 'but it was not wrong. You have no right to speak to me as though I were a naughty child. You cannot judge; you do not know all. It cannot be wrong for me to walk with Bryan.'

'Bryan! Good heavens! Are you speaking of Mr. Royston? Do you call a stranger by his Christian name?'

Her lips curled, as though she wanted to laugh, then a rosy flush came to her face.

'Bryan is not a stranger,' she said softly. 'We have known each other a long time. I did not wish to tell anyone yet, not even Judith,

but I have promised to marry him. He wanted me to be engaged to him weeks ago, but I was too much afraid; but when I came here he insisted on it. He said it would never do to go on like this.'

I was almost too shocked to answer her. When I recovered myself, I told her plainly what I thought of her conduct. 'I blame Mr. Royston most,' I finished. 'He is older, and knows the world better than you. He has acted most dishonourably in inducing you to enter into a secret engagement.'

'Miss Osborne, if you talk like this, I shall hate you,' she returned, with a stamp of her little foot, but her eyes were full of tears. 'You shall not blame poor Bryan. How could he help himself? He has begged me again and again to let him speak to Judith, but I told him that I should never be allowed to see him again.'

But I would not let myself be softened by this childish reasoning. Summoning up all my severity, I told her that I should speak to her sister myself.

'You have left me no other resource,' I continued sadly. 'I trusted you implicitly, Muriel, and this is how you have repaid my trust.'

I saw her delicate throat swell and her bosom heave; my thrust had evidently gone home. Then she thought of her lover, and hardened herself against my reproaches.

'It would be wrong in anyone else, but in our

case it is excusable,' she answered, with girlish sophistry. 'The idea of any young man drives mother crazy, and Judith gives in to her. Bryan would have been dismissed at once; Judith would not have ventured to admit him. What were we to do? We loved each other, and we were both so unhappy. Poor Bryan! But I will never, never give him up. Why are you against us, Miss Osborne? But I suppose you are not young enough to understand.'

'My dear, that is not a kind speech.'

'Then why are you so unkind to us?' she retorted, melting into tears; but after that she begged my pardon, and was so dear and winning and penitent, so irresistible altogether, that I felt I could have forgiven her a worse crime.

'But your sister must be told,' I persisted, when our reconciliation was complete, and we were sitting down to our late breakfast; and then Muriel said that she would walk over at once to Leylands. 'I must speak before my courage cools,' she observed, 'and before Bryan tries to prevent me: he does so want to speak himself.'

She started very soon after this; and it was not until she was out of sight that it suddenly occurred to me that Miss Hillyard might not be pleased to see her. I recalled with dismay a remark in one of her letters that she would drive over and fetch Muriel the moment that she was at liberty to do so. I fretted a good deal

over my own heedlessness: a note would have summoned Miss Hillyard at once. I passed a miserable morning thinking of this and of all the complication. Would Judith be able to resist her darling's entreaties? Surely not.

I had hardly expected Muriel back to our early dinner. I saw Mr. Royston glance into the room curiously as he passed our window, as though he missed something, and then I remembered that Muriel's favourite seat commanded a view of the little paved path and the gate. As the afternoon wore on I grew still more restless, and I was just making up my mind to stroll in the direction of Leylands, in the hope of meeting her, when Miss Trotter brought me a note. It was from Miss Hillyard; and I opened it with fear and trembling.

'Muriel has told me everything,' it began. 'If she had done so before, it would have spared us both a great deal of pain. Do not reproach yourself, dear Miss Osborne, for anything that has happened. Only my poor child and the man who has so thoughtlessly brought this trouble on her are to blame. Poor darling! if I could only have saved her from this! I am keeping her with me to-night: to-morrow she will come back to you for an hour; she has something she must do. I need hardly say that, after what has passed, she will be safer at The Nook. I am sure you will agree with me in this. I will write no more

to-night: you will see us both to-morrow.—Always yours most sincerely,

'JUDITH.'

I read this note with a chill sense of pain gathering at my heart: there was something inexorable, something ominous, in these few sentences; and yet they expressed no resentment or anger. As I read them again by the fading light, there was a knock at my door, and Mr. Royston entered. He looked anxious and disturbed as he glanced round the room.

'Where is Miss Hillyard?' he asked abruptly; then, as his eyes rested on the letter, 'Is that note from her? Do you mean that she has gone?'

I hesitated for a moment, and then I quietly handed him the note. As he read it, he became very pale.

'What does it mean?' he asked irritably. 'It is terribly vague. Why cannot people say what they mean? Miss Osborne, if Muriel has gone, I must go too: I cannot let her bear the brunt of this alone; it is my place to speak — not hers.'

'Mr. Royston,' I remarked severely, 'do you think it was right to talk her into an engagement? She is a mere child; anyone can see that she is ignorant of the world; you ought not to have taken advantage of her youth and inexperience.'

My words seemed to sting him: a frown came to his brow.

'You cannot judge,' he said bitterly; 'the case is altogether exceptional. I had no other course open to me. I would have spoken at once to her sister, but she would not hear of it. On my side there is nothing to prevent me: my position is good, I am able even now to maintain a wife, and my uncle would do anything for me. I would have stormed The Nook at once, if only Muriel had not begged me to wait a little. It was wrong; I see it now; it has put me in a false position,' went on the young man. 'I ought not to have yielded to her for a moment.'

I thought so too, and told him so frankly, and then he sat down and we had a long talk. I liked him all the better when we had finished: in spite of his error, he was so simple and manly, so overflowing with love and reverence for the girl of his choice, that I could not refuse to give him my hand and wish him God-speed. After all, what on earth is so beautiful as the love of two young creatures just beginning life? Such an affection has the breath of Eden about it. He had promised to take my advice and wait until Muriel had paid her promised visit: it would be too late to go on to The Nook that night. If he found it difficult to secure an interview with Muriel, he might then write, or follow her to Leylands. We parted on this understanding; and as he bade me good-night he assured me that our conversation had given him a great deal of comfort. I was inclined to doubt this when

I heard him walking about his room that night. I am afraid we neither of us slept very well.

Muriel arrived about noon. Mr. Royston was in his room when the pony-carriage drew up, for I heard him throw up his window, but she walked up the little path very quickly and with her head bent, as though she did not wish to be seen. I met her at the door and drew her into the room. As I kissed her I noticed that her face was very cold, and that her eyes were swollen, as though she had been weeping.

'My dear, how ill you look!' for indeed there was not a vestige of colour in the pretty girlish face.

'Miss Osborne, I want to see Bryan. Will you ask him to come in? You need not go away: I would rather not be alone with him;' and here she looked very piteously. 'Please ask him to come. Judith will be here presently: she has to take me back, you know, and there is no time to be lost.'

But before I could fulfil her behest we heard Mr. Royston's door flung open, there was a quick, imperative tap at mine, and the next moment he walked into the room.

'I could not help it; I felt I must come,' he said, with an apologetic glance at me; but before he could say another word two little hands were stretched out beseechingly to him.

'Bryan, you must forgive me; we were too

quick; we have made a mistake. I was wrong to be engaged to you. Please, please do not be angry with me, for I am so unhappy.'

'Is it your sister who has told you to say this to me?' returned the young man almost fiercely. For the moment, I believe, he had forgotten my presence. He had the girl's hot, trembling hands in his; there was a stormy look on his brow, but his eyes were full of reproachful love. 'Muriel, was it your mother or your sister who told you to say this?'

'It was neither,' she returned, in the same pitiful voice. 'Dear Miss Osborne, please—please do not go,' for I was about to leave the room: 'I have nothing to say to Bryan that the whole world may not hear. I am only so very sorry for the mistake we have made,' faltered the poor child; 'but we must not be engaged any longer.'

Mr. Royston started back and dropped her hands as she said this.

'Do you know what you are saying?' he exclaimed, as though he could hardly believe his ears. 'You are trying to make me believe that you are doing this of your own accord, that no one has coerced you. As though I could credit such a thing!'

'But you must believe it,' she pleaded. 'Bryan, have I ever told you a story? No one—no one is making me give you up: I am doing it because I think it right. Indeed, indeed, I am telling you the truth.'

'Are you giving me up without any reason?' he demanded harshly; but how white his face had grown! 'Muriel, this is utter nonsense! Have you ceased to love me?'

'No,' was the faint whisper.

'Of course not'—with a gleam of hope in his eyes. 'Shall we ever cease to love each other, my darling?' seizing her hand again. 'You belong to me, and I will never give you up.'

Then she shivered and shrank away from him.

'Bryan, I can never marry you. I will never marry anyone: Judith says the same, and I agree with her: she is always right. If I could tell you my reason I know you would forgive me; but I shall never tell it.'

'Do you mean you will throw me over and give me no reason for your faithlessness?—give me up, when you love me and have promised to be my wife?'

'If I had known what I know now, I would never have promised,' she returned steadily, though her lip quivered. 'I care for you too much to spoil your life. Bryan, at the risk of making you angry, I must repeat my words: I cannot—I can never marry you.'

'Is this your final word?'

'It is,' her head drooping sadly as she spoke.

'Then I had better leave you before I forget myself. Muriel, how can you have the heart to treat me in this way?'

His voice choked; he gave her a look of

mingled anger and anguish, and walked out of the room. It was better so: he was losing his self-control, and the scene was becoming too painful.

For one moment she seemed as if she would call him back.

'Cruel, cruel, to leave me so!' she murmured, while tears rolled down her pale face; but after a minute she recovered herself. 'But it is better so—better for him to be angry with me: it will make it easier for him to bear it. Miss Osborne,' turning to me with a heart-broken smile, 'don't let me think; help me to get my things ready before Judith comes. She is right: I cannot stay in this house; I must go home.'

'But I may come to you there?'

My question seemed to bewilder her: she put up her hand to her head in a weary fashion that reminded me of Judith.

'I do not know. You must ask Judith. I think I am too confused to tell you anything.'

And out of sheer pity I was obliged to keep silence.

I think Muriel hardly knew what she was doing: she was compelled at last to leave everything to me. When I had finished we went downstairs together. Mr. Royston's door stood wide open, but the room was empty: Muriel need not have averted her eyes as she passed it.

Miss Hillyard was waiting for us. As we entered she crossed the room and greeted me kindly. Her manner was as gentle as ever.

'I cannot stop now—we are rather in a hurry, are we not, Muriel?—but I will come and see you some time to-morrow. You have been so good to my dear child, and we have given you so much trouble.'

She passed her arm caressingly round her young sister as she spoke, but I noticed that Muriel did not respond. As she put up her face to kiss me, her lips felt quite cold, and there was a dazed look in her eyes.

'Good-bye, and thank you for everything,' she said, as though she were repeating a lesson by rote; but I found it difficult to answer.

'Courage, darling!' I heard Judith whisper as they went out together.

'Courage'? What did it all mean? I went back to my room feeling very low. What shadow had fallen between these two young hearts? I thought of the smiling, girlish lips that had kissed the roses the previous morning, and now the remembrance of their cold, clinging touch made me shiver. Life is full of these tragedies; but alas for the human actors who have to play out their dreary parts!

CHAPTER VIII

THE 'KILVINGTON EXPRESS'

IT was impossible to retire to rest that night without saying a word to Mr. Royston. It was true that he might regard a visit on my part as an intrusion on his privacy: most likely he would be too sore and unhappy to allow of any such word; but my heart was so full of sympathy for him and Muriel that I determined to risk even a rebuff. When I knocked at his door there was no response. I found afterwards that he had not heard me. The lamp had not been lighted, but the cold white moonbeams were shining full into the room, and I could see his attitude distinctly. He was lying back in his chair, with his arms over his head. When I addressed him he started violently.

'Mr. Royston,' I said quietly, 'I trust you will forgive this intrusion, but after what has passed I felt I could not go to bed without saying a word to you.'

'You are very good,' he returned, in a dejected tone. 'You are awfully kind to think of me at all.'

'How can I help it? Surely you must know how sorry I am for you—and Muriel.'

As I mentioned her name I heard a caught

breath almost like a sob, and he sprang up from his chair and began pacing up and down the room in an agitated manner. I thought it best to be silent; he would speak to me of his own accord by-and-by, and I was right. With a strong effort he seemed to pull himself together, and then he came back to his seat.

'It is no use,' he said bitterly. 'I cannot keep myself in hand to-night; it has all been too sudden. Miss Osborne, you were there; you heard it all from her own lips; you heard her give me up without one word of explanation.'

'Yes, and I was terribly sorry for you both.'

'You were sorry for me, you mean.'

'No, Mr. Royston, I meant what I said; sorry as I was for you, I was even more grieved for her; for if ever a girl cared for the man whom she was sending from her, Muriel is that girl.'

'And yet she has given me up.'

'Yes, but not of her own free will; some circumstances of which we are ignorant have compelled her to break off her engagement. Mr. Royston, if you had seen her face when the door closed upon you, I think you would have forgiven her. Certainly you must rest assured of this, that she is breaking her own heart as well as yours.'

He seemed to listen to me breathlessly; in some sense this assurance seemed to give him comfort; but he was too deeply wounded for any present healing; his man's pride rose up against such arbitrary treatment, and for a long time he com-

bated the notion that anything could compel Muriel to give him up. He talked to me very freely after this, and seemed to derive consolation from my ready sympathy; but a few words that I said just before I bade him good-night seemed to give him the most comfort.

'Why do you not send for your uncle, Mr. Royston?'

Strange to say, this idea had never occurred to him.

'I will telegraph to him at once,' he replied. 'What a fool I have been not to think of Uncle Calvert before! He has the clearest head in the world, and if anyone could unravel this confounded mystery it would be he. Thanks awfully, Miss Osborne; you have done me no end of good. I believe I was ready to hang myself an hour ago, but I feel better now. Of course I know you are right, and that she cares for me; I am not such a fool as all that; if I had not been in such a rage I would have told her so. She may give me up a dozen times, but all the same I shall stick to her. I have never seen the girl who could hold a candle to her,' finished the poor young fellow, in a choked voice.

I was a little easier in my mind when I had left him. Stranger as he was to me, I had conceived a great respect for Mr. Grenfell, and I was glad to think the poor lad would have his best friend beside him in his trouble. Of course he would come to him at once and advise him how to act

under these distressing circumstances. He was a barrister, too, and doubtless his experience and knowledge of human nature would enable him to help his nephew.

Miss Hillyard had not appointed any hour for her promised visit; but, although I hardly expected her until the afternoon, I did not venture to leave the house, for fear that I should miss her. I was too restless and uncomfortable to settle down to my usual pursuits, so I set myself the task of clearing out a cupboard on the upper landing that Miss Trotter had appropriated to my use; the employment would keep me busy for an hour or two: it was at present full of lumber, books and old newspapers, and a stock of nondescript odds and ends. I grew interested over my task, and was just sitting down to rest for a moment, when a paragraph in one of the newspapers attracted my eye, and a feeling of curiosity induced me to read it.

It was headed 'The Kilvington Mystery,' and, glancing at the paper I held, I saw it was the *Kilvington Express*. The article was written in the bombastic and somewhat verbose style of the country editor. 'A terrible tragedy has lately happened in our neighbourhood, and which has plunged our little town into profound gloom. Last Tuesday afternoon the two sons of our esteemed and much-lamented member, Philip Haldane, M.P., of The Warren, were shooting in the Warren coverts. It had been noticed by several people

who had met them that morning that the young men seemed gloomy and out of sorts; this was specially commented on by the Rector, who stopped to exchange a few words with them. A little later George Armstrong and his son Silas, who were cutting wood in the copse, saw the young Squires pass; they were talking loudly and angrily, and Silas, who was about a stone's-throw from his father, heard Horace, the elder one, say, "Give your word, Beaver, or I vow I'll do for you and her too;" but the answer to this failed to reach him. A few minutes later a rough, seafaring sort of man, with a wallet over his shoulder, passed through the copse and asked Silas for a match to light his pipe. The man had hardly left him five minutes before there was a loud report close by; but of course no notice was taken of it. Half an hour later, as he was making his way down a side-path to find a tree marked by the bailiff, he was horrified to see Beaver Haldane lying on the grass, with his gun beside him. He was evidently quite dead, and his brother was standing beside him, too much stunned to answer any questions. Later on he gave a confused and unsatisfactory account. He and his brother had parted company after a time, and as he was crossing the nut-copse a pheasant rose near him. Somehow, he missed his aim. The next moment he heard a groan; something heavy fell behind the bushes, and he saw his brother lying on the grass, with a rough sort of man, like a tramp, bending

over him. When questioned about this man's singular disappearance—for no trace has yet been discovered of him—Mr. Horace Haldane could give no satisfactory information; indeed, it is to be regretted that his whole evidence was so confused that it has only deepened unhappy suspicions. He said that he was too much overwhelmed with the shock of the accident to notice the man clearly, but he remembered that as he stepped out of the bushes he said to him, a little roughly, "You have done for him, master; but it was no fault of yours. I saw the whole thing quite plainly." Inquiries have been made for the tramp, and certain facts have been elicited about him. The night previously he slept at the Pig and Whistle, and gave his name as Jacob Dawson, and told the landlady that he was on his way to South America.

'We grieve to say that, in consequence of the evidence of Silas Armstrong and two of the servants at The Warren, there is little doubt that Mr. Horace Haldane will be committed for trial at the next assizes for the wilful murder of his brother; and, in spite of the unfortunate young man's protestations of his innocence, things look very black against him. It is now an acknowledged fact that the brothers were on bad terms; they had quarrelled about a certain young lady, to whom they were both paying their addresses, and, though it is not well to mention names, the young lady is well known in the neighbourhood for her beauty

and coquetry. A great deal of sympathy is felt for the family at The Warren; and it is greatly feared that Mrs. Haldane, who has been in delicate health since her husband's death, will not get over the shock, and that her eldest daughter——' Here the page was torn across, and the thread of the story was broken.

'Truth is stranger than fiction,' I said to myself as I laid the paper aside; but somehow I could not forget that dismal little tragedy; it haunted me all the rest of the morning. I wished I could hear the end. Had that unfortunate Horace Haldane been committed for trial? Had they acquitted him, or was he really guilty, and had he paid the penalty of his unnatural crime? In that case, what had become of the unhappy widowed mother? I wondered how many years ago it had all happened; the torn paper gave me no clue. I worked busily all the rest of the morning, and spent the afternoon sewing by the window. I saw Mr. Royston once or twice in the course of the day; he looked ill and subdued, but told me very quietly that he had heard from his uncle, and fully expected him that evening.

When evening came, I grew weary of my solitude, and as Miss Hillyard had not yet made her appearance, I determined to meet her. I wanted air and exercise, and a brisk walk would do me good. Mousquetaire was delighted when he saw my bonnet, and flew barking and frisking for joy towards the gate; but he was doomed to disap-

pointment. At that very moment the tall, graceful figure of Miss Hillyard turned the corner, with the hound, as usual, beside her.

'Were you going out?' she asked quickly. 'It is such a lovely evening. Perhaps you will like to walk back with me; we could talk just as well, and it seems cruel to keep you in.'

'Yes; but you must come in and rest first,' was my reply. 'I do not wish to part with you so soon.'

'Very well,' she returned, with the soft smile that always lit up her dark face with new beauty. But at that moment Mr. Grenfell came up to the gate. He was walking very fast, and carried a small portmanteau, as though he had just come from the station. He just lifted his hat to me with a pleasant 'Good-evening,' when a faint exclamation from Judith arrested him. He stood for a moment, as though he were suddenly transfixed. I noticed his face grew pale; then he gave her a keen, piercing look, and, raising his hat again, walked into the house.

I hardly dared look at Miss Hillyard. She was perfectly white, and trembling from head to foot. 'My dear,' I said gently, 'you are faint. No, do not say a word; let me help you.' And, passing my arm through hers, I half led, half dragged her into my room.

But it was not faintness; I knew that well—it was some strong overmastering emotion that was convulsing her features, and that made her gasp,

as though in pain. She took no notice of the water I had brought her; but as I stood beside her, she suddenly laid her head against my shoulder, as though some weakness compelled her. 'Oh, Heaven! it was Calvert!' I heard her whisper, and two large tears ran down her face. 'We have met again, and like this, and he would not speak to me.' And she shuddered all over.

It was useless to say anything; I could only soothe her as though she were a child; but by-and-by she started up with a terrified expression as Hector laid his slender nose against her hand. The action seemed to rouse her.

'Yes, I must go back; it will never do to stay here. If I were to see him again, to meet that reproachful, severe look, I should die! Dear friend, help me; I am so strangely weak to-night, and I must go home.'

I endeavoured to persuade her to the contrary. I told her that she was ill, and that if she would stay with me I would take care of her, and no one should molest her; but she would not listen to this for a moment. She rose from her seat trembling all over, and repeated that she must go, and go at once. The air would revive her, and do her good; she was stifled in this room (and here her eyes grew a little wild). I might walk with her if I liked, but she could not talk; she had had a shock—a great shock—and I must give her time to recover herself. All this in a hurried, broken way.

Alas! I had no power to prevent her, and we went out into the gathering dusk together. Some intense power of will sustained her until the house was out of sight, and then her strength seemed to fail again. She leaned on me heavily, and every now and then I heard short, gasping breaths, as though from an oppressed heart. I thought that walk would never come to an end. Once we sat down, and it was long before she could summon strength to rise; but if I spoke to her, she only shook her head and said she could not talk.

'It is my heart,' she whispered at last, as we walked slowly down the beech avenue. 'I have gone through so much, and it is overtaxed. Do not tell Muriel this. Poor child! she is so unhappy. Ours is a cruel fate. Oh, why could not Calvert have spared me that look! Have I not suffered enough?'

Here a sob choked her utterance, and I could hear that she was weeping.

It was quite dark when we reached The Nook. As I set the rusty bell tingling, the door was opened quickly, and Muriel stood on the threshold.

'How late you are, Judith!' she said fretfully.

My poor, pretty Muriel, how those few hours had changed her! Then, as she caught sight of me, her pale face brightened.

'Dear Muriel,' I said softly, 'I think your sister is ill—at least, she is far from well. Will you

take care of her? and I will come round in the morning and see how she is.'

'Ill!—Judith!'

Then, as a glance at her sister's face confirmed my words, Muriel put her arms round her sister, and drew her gently into the house. I thought it better not to follow them; they would talk more freely to each other if they were alone. I walked back to Walton feeling sadder than ever. The shadows seemed creeping closer. As I let myself in, I could hear voices in Mr. Royston's room; the night was half over before I heard him coming upstairs, and it was long after that before I could compose myself to sleep.

CHAPTER IX

'YOU WILL TELL ME EVERYTHING'

I STARTED early for Leylands. When I reached the beech avenue, I was surprised to see Mr. Grenfell coming quickly towards me. The meeting was evidently unexpected on his part, for he looked slightly confused as he stopped to shake hands with me, and he seemed painfully anxious to impress on my mind that morning walks were necessary to his constitution.

'This is better than London streets,' he went on hurriedly. 'They call the little village yonder

Leylands, do they not? I was never here before, but it is very pretty and Arcadian.'

'Are you going to have breakfast with Mr. Royston?'

'Yes'—rather absently. 'But Bryan has early work this morning; he was in his class-room as I passed. You are going on to The Nook, I suppose, Miss Osborne? May I ask if you have known these ladies long?'

'Do you mean Miss Hillyard and her sister?'

'Miss Hillyard?' looking at me a little strangely. 'Yes, to be sure; we are talking of the same person.'

I thought his manner a little odd, but my reply told him all that he evidently wished to know—that I was deeply interested in them both, and had conceived the warmest attachment to them.

'I am glad to hear it,' he returned, with rather a sad smile; 'they need friends.'

He seemed as though he wished to say more, for he hesitated, looked at me, and finally bade me 'Good-bye' in a hurried way, as though he feared to commit himself. I thought Mr. Grenfell looked older and more careworn this morning; there were lines round his eyes and mouth that I had not noticed before. I wondered what had brought him to Leylands. I began to be a little weary of wondering; I felt oppressed with all the vagueness and mystery. Only one thing was clear to me—that the woman who had spoiled Mr. Grenfell's life was Judith Hillyard. Those

few words, 'Oh, Heaven! it was Calvert!' had betrayed her secret.

When I reached The Nook, a tradesman's cart was standing before the door, and a curly-haired lad was holding it open, and whistling to Hector, who received these overtures with sullen dignity. As the inner door was open also, I went in without waiting for Rebecca to announce me, and found my way to the morning-room; but I regretted my want of formality when I found that neither Miss Hillyard nor Muriel was there, and that its sole occupant was a young man who was reading the paper in the farthest window.

My appearance seemed to startle him, for he threw down the paper and jumped up as though to leave the room. I begged him not to disturb himself; but he said hurriedly that one of the Miss Hillyards would come to me. He looked about eight-and-twenty, and was an exceedingly handsome man. But I was less struck by his good looks than by his wonderful likeness to Miss Hillyard; he had the same dark complexion, the same large melancholy eyes, and his voice resembled hers. Could he be any relation? I asked myself, as I took the seat he had just vacated. A small book was lying at my elbow; it was a Greek Testament, and I took it up curiously. It was a worn, shabby little book, and was evidently well read; it seemed to open of its own accord at the fly-leaf. As I read the name I uttered an exclamation, and felt a sudden

sensation of giddiness. Were my eyes deceiving me? could I be dreaming? The name I had seen was 'Horace Matheson Haldane, from his brother Beaver.' I do not know how long I sat there. I was conscious of nothing until someone touched my shoulder, and, looking up, I saw Miss Hillyard regarding me somewhat anxiously.

'What is the matter?' she asked. 'You are quite pale! You look as though something had troubled you! Why did you not ring as usual? Rebecca had orders not to show anyone in here. The room was engaged: a gentleman who is staying here—but, of course, you saw him!' interrupting herself still more nervously; 'and he told me you were here.'

I do not know what possessed me; to my dying day I shall never understand the sudden uncontrollable impulse that impelled me to answer her; but as she paused I looked her full in the eyes, and said:

'Yes, I have seen your brother, Miss Hillyard. He is very like you; no one could mistake such a resemblance; and I know, too, that his name is Horace Haldane.'

For one moment I thought she would have fainted; and yet it was with no intent of wringing the truth from her that I blurted out this strange sentence: the secret force that impelled me had overmastered me for the moment. When I saw her sink into a chair with a white, stricken look, I accused myself of positive cruelty.

'My dear, my dear!' I exclaimed remorsefully, as I chafed her cold hands, 'I did not mean to say this, but the words seemed to come of themselves. Look here, this little book told me; and then there was the likeness. When I entered this house a few minutes ago I had no idea of your secret; now I know everything; it is all clear as the day. But you need not be afraid of me: if ever a friend were true, I am true to you and Muriel.'

'Do you mean it?' she asked piteously. 'Oh, Miss Osborne, how could you frighten me so? We never meant you to see him. I told Muriel that Rebecca must not admit you; but she begged so hard that she might speak to you for a moment, and, as Horace always has this room, you were to be shown into the dining-room. Poor Horace! he has had a fright too; he looked like a ghost when he told me a strange lady had seen him.'

'Now that I have seen him, you will tell me everything, will you not? and then, perhaps, I may be able to help you. I know more than you think. I can tell you the name of your old home: it was The Warren, Kilvington, was it not?' But she put up her hand to silence me.

'Hush! I cannot speak to you yet. Will you wait a moment? I must send Muriel to my mother; she is very ill, worse than usual. That is why Horace is with us; she made me send for him. Somehow I think she will not be long

with us. Ah, well, for her own sake we ought to be thankful when she is released from a life of misery.' And with these words she left me.

I was alone for nearly half an hour, and then she came back and took a seat quietly beside me. In my surprise and agitation I had forgotten the events of the previous night, but now, as the light fell on her worn features, I was shocked at the change in her appearance; her eyes looked more sunken, and there was an expression in them as though her heart were slowly breaking. I felt convinced then that, unless the burden were lifted from her, Judith Hillyard would not be long for this world.

'My mother is asleep, and Muriel is beside her, so we shall not be interrupted. Now will you tell me all you know? I suppose'—here she hesitated a moment, as though she could hardly pronounce his name—'I suppose Mr. Grenfell has been talking to you.'

'He has told me nothing.' Then, as she glanced at me in surprise, I related the few facts that I had gleaned from the *Kilvington Express*.

She listened to me with forced composure. I told her that I had come to the conclusion that these unhappy circumstances had induced her to break off her engagement with Mr. Grenfell, and that their meeting yesterday had convinced me that she was the person to whom Mr. Royston had alluded. 'Mr. Royston was ignorant of the lady's name, but he told me that it was for her

sake that his uncle had remained single. I suppose'—and here I looked at her inquiringly—'that the same reasons have compelled Muriel to give up her lover.'

'Yes,' she returned quietly; 'but you must not think that we have coerced her. Muriel has her share of the family pride. She will not bring a blight over any man's life. It was my painful duty to tell her the truth; for her own sake we had kept it from her. Her first words when she heard everything were, "Judith, you must help me; I must not, I dare not marry Bryan while this stain is on Horace."'

'Good heavens! do you mean to imply that your brother is guilty?' I spoke a little too hastily, for she changed colour and put her hand to her heart.

'I implied nothing. The verdict was in his favour, but as far as public opinion was concerned he was not cleared. People said that the evidence was strongly against him; even Calvert—Mr. Grenfell, I mean—allowed that, though he always believed in his innocence; but he was young, and there were extenuating circumstances, so they said, and the jury were unwilling to convict him on circumstantial evidence: so they acquitted him.'

'Thank Heaven for that.'

'Yes, there was much to criminate him,' she murmured in the same helpless tone; 'appearances were so against him. He and Beaver had

not been on good terms; both of them were in love with Sibyl Grey, our Rector's daughter, and but for Horace she and Beaver would have been engaged. It was this that told against him in court; the servants of The Warren used to hear them quarrelling in their rooms at night. Once old Joseph, our butler, came to me with tears in his eyes and asked me to separate them. Of course it was Horace's fault—he was always passionate; but until then he and Beaver had been so fond of each other.'

'You have your brother's account, of course.'

'Yes, he has told us everything; but he was too much stunned by the accident to give very clear evidence. He owned that he and Beaver had had words, and that they had parted in anger. He wanted Beaver to go away and give him a chance of winning Sibyl, and Beaver had refused. He says that he left poor Beaver in the nut-copse, and that he intended to make his way towards the Fairies' Hollow, as we used to call it, as he was too much out of sorts to go after the game; but as he was leaning against a tree, lost in thought, a pheasant rose from the bushes near him, and he snatched up his gun and determined to have a shot at him; but his hand shook, and he missed the bird, and the next moment he heard a groan, followed by the crackling of the bushes.'

She stopped here in extreme agitation, and I begged her to spare herself—the story was too terrible. I told her that I knew the rest—that

his brother was dead; and then I hazarded the question whether anything had been heard of the tramp.

My question seemed to surprise her.

'No, they could find no trace of him: he seemed to have vanished as suddenly as he came. The landlady of the Pig and Whistle said he seemed a decent sort of seafaring man, only he was rather down on his luck, he told her; but Horace thought him a mere tramp. The counsel for the defence was very anxious to find him, and I know a detective was sent to Liverpool.'

'Did they advertise for him in America?'

'I do not know. My memory gets confused at times when I try to remember that dreadful day.'

'Your brother is generally away, you say?'

'Yes, he has a ranch in Colorado. Occupation is good for him, and he likes the life. He is happier away from England. I think'—hesitating slightly—'that the shock affected his nerves: he seems subject to a strange apprehension; he declares that he is virtually guilty in the eyes of the public, and that at any moment he may be arrested; and my mother has the same fear.'

'That is why you have changed your name?'

'It is my mother's name, and it was at her wish that we adopted it. Perhaps it is difficult for you to grasp the whole situation. When dear Beaver was brought back to The Warren—he was her darling, her Benjamin—we feared for her reason,

and even now it is easy to see that her mind is unhinged. We should have gone abroad with Horace, if her health would have permitted her to undertake the voyage; but she was utterly prostrate. When she rallied a little, her first desire was for utter privacy; we must go where no one could find us; and as one place seemed as good as another, we brought her here. As long as she lives we must stay here, for I could not take the responsibility of moving her. A strange voice or footstep throws her into a paroxysm of nervous excitement that might at any moment end her life.'

'And you will never return to The Warren?'

'Never'—with a faint shudder. 'We have all suffered too much there. Besides, Sibyl Grey is still at the Rectory. She and Horace correspond. She has always believed in his innocence, and is sorry for him. Her letters are his chief pleasure, for he is still in love with her. He tells me that she is utterly changed, that since Beaver's death she has devoted herself to her family and the poor people round her. I was always fond of her, in spite of her faults.'

She paused here, as though she were weary, and glanced at the timepiece.

'I must go now,' she said, rising somewhat hastily. 'Horace is leaving us to-night, and he will want me. There is no use in our keeping him any longer; my mother may go on for a long time yet, and this quiet life is so bad for him.

Good-bye, dear Miss Osborne. I will send Muriel to you for a few minutes, but you must promise not to keep her long.'

She left me, and a moment afterwards Muriel crept into the room. Poor little soul! Her heart was too full for speech: she could only throw herself into my arms and lay her weary little face against mine; but presently she raised her head and dried her eyes, as though she were ashamed of her emotion.

'No, you must not pity me; it was all my fault, although Judith is too kind to tell me so. I had no right to let Bryan make love to me. I ought not to have listened to him. Oh, if I could suffer for both! How does he look, Miss Osborne? Is he very unhappy? or is he still angry with me? I hope—I hope that he will always be angry with me,' finished the poor child, but her lips quivered as she spoke. 'It will make it easier for him to give me up. He is so young, as Judith says, and he has known me such a little time, that he will soon get over it.'

But her eyes contradicted her words; they seemed to appeal to me for comfort.

I told her as much as I could without betraying Mr. Royston's confidence: that he was deeply wounded and very unhappy, and that I was sure that in his heart he had already forgiven her.

'I do not think he has quite lost hope,' I continued, watching her very narrowly as I spoke. 'Mr. Royston has a strong will; he does not

relinquish easily anything on which he has set his mind.'

A faint glow came to Muriel's face—no doubt it was sweet to her to hear this; but the next moment she braced herself afresh.

'You must tell him not to hope,' she said quickly. 'If you are his friend, it would be kinder to bid him forget me as soon as possible.'

But to this I made no answer, and a few minutes afterwards I took my leave.

She followed me to the gate and stood there watching me. How sweet and girlish she looked! She was in white, and a spray of red leaves she had just gathered was still in her hands. It grieved me to the heart to leave her in that desolate house. She was so young, so framed for happiness and love, that it was sad to think that the sorrow that had shadowed her sister's life must touch her too.

But it was not of Muriel that I thought as I walked down the sunshiny road. I was pondering on my interview with her sister. A strange doubt had crept into my mind: if Horace Haldane were innocent, if he had not deliberately and with intent aimed that shot at his brother's heart, why had Judith renounced her lover? Why had she doomed herself and him to a lonely, unsatisfactory life?

The answer to this was plain: something in her guarded manner, in the effort with which she spoke of her brother, had revealed the truth

to me. However much she might deny it, in her secret heart Judith believed in her brother Horace's guilt, and her reasons for this belief would be locked up in her bosom until her dying day. I wondered if Mr. Grenfell had guessed this; but, as I remembered the calm, inscrutable look with which he had greeted the woman he had hoped to make his wife, I feared that no such thought had ever entered his mind.

CHAPTER X

MR. GRENFELL SEEKS AN INTERVIEW

I WAS sitting alone in my room that afternoon, brooding over these sad thoughts, when I heard a knock at my door, and, to my surprise, Mr. Grenfell entered. He apologized very courteously for his intrusion.

'The fact is, Miss Osborne,' he said, with a pleasant smile, 'you have taken such a great interest in my nephew, and Bryan looks upon you so much as his friend, that I have ventured to take this liberty with you. I know you are in his confidence about this unhappy attachment to the youngest Miss'—he hesitated slightly—'Hillyard.'

'To the youngest Miss Haldane, I suppose you

mean ;' for I thought it best to show him at once that I understood the reason of his hesitation.

He started. For the first moment he was evidently taken aback.

'I had no idea that you were acquainted with their sad story,' he returned. 'Bryan told me that you had only known them for a few months.'

'That is true. A mere accident gave me a clue to the secret; now I know everything'—with a meaning emphasis on the last word, and I think he understood me.

'Then in that case,' he went on, with decided relief, 'we can talk with greater ease. As you may suppose, Bryan was quite in the dark, and the whole story was a great shock to him. You see, he was not on the spot, as I was, and it was a little difficult for him to realize such a tragedy.'

Mr. Grenfell spoke very quietly, but his apparent calmness did not deceive me. He was a man who would always hide his deepest feelings. Stranger as he was to me, I knew that this sudden and unexpected meeting with his old love had tried him sorely.

'I suppose Mr. Royston will be more ready to renounce Muriel now,' I observed tentatively, for that was not my real belief at all.

He shook his head. 'You do not know Bryan, if you think that. He is an obstinate fellow, and his nature is very tenacious. I always tell him that he has something of the bull-dog about him,

He will not hear of giving her up; on the contrary, he is all the more eager to marry her. Her unhappy situation only makes him wish to shield her.'

'I can understand that. Mr. Royston only proves the reality of his affection.'

'Other men would gladly have done the same,' he answered quickly; then he stopped, and a sombre light came into his eyes. 'I knew Muriel Haldane very slightly—she was a mere child five years ago—but if she shares her sister's pride and strong will, Bryan will stand a poor chance of realizing his wishes.'

He spoke with some degree of bitterness, and I was silent for a few moments. Should I venture to speak to him openly, would he regard my frankness as an unpardonable liberty? I could not answer this; but I felt the circumstances were too peculiar, the stake too precious, for any mere conventionality to hinder me; for his own good I must run the risk of offending him.

'Mr. Grenfell, I am going to take a strange liberty. I know of the relation in which you stand to the family. Will you answer me one question? Believe me, I am not asking it out of curiosity. What reason did Miss Haldane assign for breaking off her engagement?'

It was evident that he resented this bluntness. He drew himself up a little stiffly, and a dark flush rose to his face.

'You think I am impertinent; but you do not

know my motive. I am aware that Miss Haldane broke off her engagement with you under a pressing sense of duty, and that in doing so she sacrificed her own happiness; and I consider she acted very nobly.'

'You must pardon me if I differ from you,' almost haughtily. 'There is nothing noble in an exaggerated and mistaken sense of duty. You must remember, when you speak in this one-sided way, that she sacrificed my happiness as well; and now her sister is following her example. I am very sorry for Bryan, but I have told him that there is no hope for him. Even if his lady-love be inclined to yield, her sister's strong will will dominate her.'

He was making my task a little difficult, but I would not be beaten. I looked at him very pleadingly.

'Mr. Grenfell, you have not answered my question.'

My persistence evidently surprised him; but he must have known that a strong motive actuated me.

'Mrs. Haldane was suffering from hysteria at the time of the unfortunate accident, and was in a lamentable state—I believe there was some fear of her losing her reason—and Horace was in a highly nervous state.'

'And you did not consider these sufficient grounds for her breaking off the engagement?'

'Certainly not. They were only reasons for

postponing her marriage; and any man would have been willing to wait under such circumstances. Unfortunately, Miss Haldane considered it her duty to remain unmarried.'

'Mr. Grenfell, has it ever occurred to you that she may have kept from you her real reason?—that under the pretext of her mother's mental illness she may have hidden the true motive? There is nothing capricious or morbid in Judith Haldane's character. If she refused to marry you, it was only because she dared not.'

'What do you mean?' he asked, and by his manner I could see that no suspicion of the truth had ever entered his mind.

'Do you think that a high-minded, conscientious woman like Miss Haldane, a proud woman, too, would consent to marry any man, however dearly she may have loved him, if she believed her brother guilty of wilful and premeditated murder, of the horrible sin of fratricide?'

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed, turning very pale, 'what can you mean by putting such a question? Horace was absolutely innocent. I know things looked very black at first, but no one who knew him believed that the shot was anything but purely accidental.'

'I am glad to hear you say this; but, Mr. Grenfell, I cannot change my opinion; I believe, as surely as I sit here, that Miss Haldane is convinced in her own mind that her brother is guilty, and that this belief is torturing her day

by day. A woman's instinct is very quick, and I have come to this conclusion. This is the true reason why she has broken off her engagement; she will shadow no man's life.'

Some strange emotion seemed to overmaster him, and he was unable to reply for a moment.

'Can this be true?' I heard him say; then he walked to the window and stood there, as though lost in thought.

'If you be right,' he said at last, breaking the silence so suddenly that I quite started at the sound of his voice, 'I have done Miss Haldane a great injustice. Oh, if she had only trusted me! If she had only allowed me to guess this!'

'How could she hint such a thing of her brother? She would hide such a suspicion in her own bosom. If she has told anyone, it is Muriel.'

'Yes, I see; you think the same motive has actuated the younger sister.'

'That is my idea, certainly, and I think I am right. Mr. Grenfell, you know why I asked you that question. Until their brother's name is cleared, Miss Haldane and her sister will decline to marry anyone.'

'I must tell Bryan this.'

'Yes; and I think there is one other thing to do, and that is to find Jacob Dawson, if he be living.'

He seemed a little mystified at this; the name had escaped his memory; but as soon as I had

recalled it to him, his keen, lawyer-like sagacity awoke in a moment.

'To be sure. They sent a detective to Liverpool, but they could never find a trace of him. I remember poor Horace was so anxious that he should be found. I will talk the matter over with Bryan, and I will go over the evidence for the defence most carefully with him. We will not leave a stone unturned. What fools we men are, even the wisest of us! To think that she was bearing this, too, and that I was hard on her! No wonder she looks ill and changed—so changed that for the moment I failed to recognise her.'

I would not add to his self-reproach by telling him that his sternness had almost broken her heart. Perhaps one day, if things came right, he would make his peace with her, and those two proud natures would read each other more truly. So I bade him good-bye kindly when he rose to take leave. His nephew had just come in from afternoon school, and he determined to speak to him at once.

I was not sorry to be left alone. The agitations of the last two days, and my deep sympathy for these young creatures, had culminated in an intense nervous headache, that prostrated me for the next twenty-four hours.

The next morning I found it impossible to raise my head from the pillow, and when Miss Trotter brought me my tea, she informed me that Mr. Royston had been asking after me, and that he

desired to be told directly I felt well enough to see him.

I passed the morning in languor and pain, but when evening came I felt much better, and sent for him. He came at once, and was very kind and sympathizing. He said I had taken all the worry too much to heart, and had made myself ill. Then he told me that his uncle had gone down to Kilvington to interview the landlady of the Pig and Whistle.

'You have put new life into him, Miss Osborne,' he continued gratefully. 'He declares you have made everything clear to him; that he had never rightly understood why Miss Hillyard—I mean Miss Haldane—persisted in refusing to marry him, but that now everything is as plain as daylight to him. Of course, he thinks that she is utterly mistaken; and if we can only find Jacob Dawson, he hopes to be able to prove it to her. He says she was always a little hard on her brother Horace, and that Beaver was her favourite; she never quite understood his excitable nature, and his weakness and vacillation tried her. By all accounts, I am afraid Miss Hillyard is a very strong-minded woman.'

'She is simply the most interesting person that I have ever met,' I returned quickly; and then I asked Mr. Royston if he had ever seen a more lovely face.

'She is certainly very beautiful,' he answered, in rather a grudging manner; 'that is, she would

be beautiful if she were not so thin and colourless; but I think her sister far prettier.'

And after that there was nothing more to be said.

To compare Muriel with her! What strange, purblind creatures lovers are! They see everything through a glamour. 'A poor thing, but mine own,' as Touchstone said of his rustic, homely Audrey. After all, there is a sort of pathos in these words.

We had a long talk after that, and I expressed my surprise to Mr. Royston that the search for Jacob Dawson had not been carried out more vigorously.

'It seems to me that he was the sole eye-witness, and that only his testimony is wanting to clear Horace Haldane's name.'

'My uncle thinks that they did not attach sufficient importance to Haldane's account; his evidence was so confused that more than one person thought it was merely an aberration of fancy on his part. True, Jacob Dawson was seen by the young wood-cutter—in fact, there was some conversation between them—but from what Uncle Calvert tells me, there is certainly a discrepancy between Haldane's and Silas Armstrong's account, and in point of time it was plainly impossible for Jacob Dawson to have reached the dingle.'

'It is possible that Silas Armstrong may have been wrong.'

'Certainly; and I think with you, Miss Osborne, that a more energetic search for the man should have been prosecuted. Five years is a long time, and he may not be living. We shall hear what my uncle thinks. He has promised to telegraph directly he reaches town, and I am to meet him there. Now we have talked long enough, for you are looking pale and tired; so I mean to wish you good-night.' And he would not let me speak another word.

I went over to Middleton the following afternoon, as I had some commissions to do for myself and Muriel: there were some books and drawing-paper that she had long wanted, and we had planned to go over together. My business occupied the whole afternoon, and it was evening before I returned. Two notes were awaiting me: one was from Mr. Royston, telling me that he was going up to town that very evening, and the other was from Muriel, begging me to come over the next day; her brother had left, and, as Judith was unable to leave her mother, she was sadly in want of companionship. I was to stay to luncheon, and we would have one of our old sketching afternoons.

I spent the whole day at The Nook, and before I left Judith begged me, as a great favour, to spend a few days with them.

'I am upstairs the greater part of the day,' she said, 'and it is not good for Muriel to be alone; she is not looking well, and I can see she is fretting.'

And, as it was impossible to refuse such a request, I promised to return the next day.

Mr. Royston had just arrived, and his bag was still on the hall table. He came round to my room at once, and gave me a piece of intelligence that almost took away my breath. He and Mr. Grenfell were going to New York in quest of Jacob Dawson.

I asked him what had put such an idea into Mr. Grenfell's head, and why they did not advertise; but he said his uncle needed a change, and that he had always wished to visit America, and that he had begged him to accompany him.

'You see,' he observed, in the most casual way, as though New York were just round the corner, 'term ends next Thursday, and I shall be free for several weeks, and I am not exactly in the humour for Swiss valleys and Alpine climbing, and as we are both in the same boat, we may as well cast in our lot together. Uncle Calvert thinks we can do the business better in person; and if we be unsuccessful we can put the matter in the hands of a smart Yankee detective. He says he had a little talk with a man who was hostler at the Pig and Whistle five years ago: he was in hospital at the time of the trial, on account of some injury from the kick of a horse, and no one had applied to him for evidence. His name was Robert Drake. He remembered Jacob Dawson distinctly, because he was an Essex man, and came from his own village; Dawson told him that he had worked

his way over from New York, because he wanted to see his old mother again, who was still living at Dunscombe, but that she was just dead, and that he was going back, as he had a bit of land out there; he had wandered out of his way to look up a mate of his, but he meant to go on to Liverpool. He told Drake that he never expected to see the old country again. Drake's account of him was that he was a decent sort of chap, and as sharp as a Yankee.'

When Mr. Royston had finished his account, I told him of my proposed visit to The Nook. He said frankly that he was very glad to hear it, and that, as he should not see me the next evening, he would wish me good-bye now.

He spoke so lightly that I reminded him that we should not meet for two whole months; but he did not seem the least impressed by this, neither did he charge me with any parting message to Muriel. Indeed, his manner altogether mystified me: he looked excited, and as though he were in the best of spirits; his strong, buoyant nature had rallied again; he was young enough to be sanguine, and his uncle's energy had infused new life into him. 'Nil desperandum' was certainly Bryan Royston's favourite motto.

CHAPTER XI

'IT IS BETTER SO'

I CONFESS that I was chagrined at Mr. Royston's indifference. I thought he might have shown some slight regret at this breaking off of our daily intercourse. I knew that I should miss him. Two months! it was a long time, and a great deal might happen in it. But I kept these reflections to myself. It was a great pleasure to me to be with Muriel again, and we at once resumed our old habits. Mrs. Hillyard's increasing illness obliged us to close the piano; but we read French together, and studied harmony, and Muriel made great progress with her pencil. It was sad to see how she strove, and often unavailingly, to interest herself in these various pursuits; how she tried to deceive herself and me with the belief that her work gave her pleasure. She would go on steadily through the day, her dear face becoming paler and graver, but towards evening she would give it all up, and if Judith did not need her, she would sit for hours at my feet, pretending to read, but in reality thinking of her lover. When Sunday evening came, I accompanied her to the village church, as Judith could not leave her mother. Mrs. Hillyard had grown very exacting and peevish,

and could hardly bear her eldest daughter out of her sight, and Muriel found it very difficult to relieve her sister. As we walked across the churchyard she told me sorrowfully that she knew Judith's strength was breaking down, and that the life was killing her; she had had one or two fainting attacks lately, and the doctor had warned her of over-exertion. Muriel was so absorbed in these thoughts that she failed to recognise a tall figure that stood in the darkest corner of the porch, and she passed into the church without a suspicion that Mr. Royston was following us, and had taken his old place behind us; but by-and-by his deep voice, as he repeated the responses, reached her, and I saw her start and flush, while her head drooped over her book. When the service was over she whispered to me not to move; there was a book she wanted in the organ-loft; when the congregation had gone she would find it. I knew that this was only an excuse for lingering in the church until Mr. Royston was out of sight, but of course I treated the statement as though it were gospel; and when the last person had passed out she went in quest of the book, and returned with a shabby little hymn-book that I afterwards found belonged to one of the school-children.

It was a harmless little subterfuge, but it failed utterly. We neither of us knew Mr. Royston. As we stepped out into the golden evening light,

and I paused for a moment to admire the sunset, he came quietly to her side. I felt Muriel grasp my arm. 'Do not leave me'—that was what her action conveyed. Poor little soul! she was trembling like a leaf.

Mr. Royston looked at her reproachfully.

'Why are you afraid of me?' he asked. 'Is it not natural that I should wish to see you again? We parted in anger. Do you remember that? Do you think I could carry only that memory with me across the Atlantic?' Then, as she started and looked at him, he continued more gently, 'Yes, I am going away, and for a long time: ask Miss Osborne, if you do not believe me. Muriel, I must speak to you for a moment: if you will not listen to me here, I will follow you home and ask to see your sister. You have no right to refuse me such a request, and,' as she hesitated, 'if you wish it, Miss Osborne shall remain; but I will not go until you have heard me.'

And of course he had his way. When had she been able to refuse him anything? But she would not trust herself alone with him. Muriel had not her sister's strength of mind, and her heart was so completely in his keeping. She let him take her hand after that, while he guided us to a quiet spot where no spying villager could see us.

'It is not right, Bryan,' she said, more than once: 'we have given each other up, and you

ought not to have followed us. What shall I say to Judith when I go home? She will think me so weak to listen to you.'

'Let her think what she likes,' he returned impatiently. 'Muriel, you are wrong, you are altogether wrong. I have not given you up; I will never give you up as long as you love me. You made me very angry the other day. I did not understand you, and I thought you were treating me badly; but, my poor darling, you could not help yourself—I know that now, and of course my anger has gone. What do words matter when two people belong to each other? You have given me up, you say, but in reality you are as much mine as ever.'

'Oh, Bryan!' she stammered, but the next moment I was out of ear-shot. How could I stand there when they were holding each other's hands, and he was looking at her as though she were all his world and he never meant to part with her? Miss Hillyard might blame me, and rightly too, but my woman's heart was too much for me: they should have a few minutes' happiness if I could procure it for them: so I strolled among the few graves, pausing here and there to trace some homely epitaph, or to stand idly by the churchyard wall, listening to the cawing of the rooks. I am afraid to think how long I stayed there, but the last sunset cloud had faded into grayness when I returned to them. They were still standing in the same attitude, and he was

still talking to her; but when Muriel saw me she drew her hands away.

'You must go now,' she whispered. 'We have stayed too long already.'

'One moment, my dearest.'

And, as I discreetly walked on, I could still hear their murmuring voices; but before I reached the gate Muriel joined me.

'Bryan asks me to thank you,' she said softly. 'Miss Osborne, was it very wrong to speak to him? It has made me so happy!'

And I could see by the expression of her little dark face that she spoke the truth. Poor child! the thought of his anger had weighed on her heavily; but she had seen him again, and he had told her that he would never give her up, and that one day he meant to claim her, and the assurance had comforted her.

'Bryan wanted to see you again, but he thought it best not to follow you,' she went on, as we walked towards The Nook. 'He says that it was so kind of you to leave us, but that you are always so good to him. I think he means to write to you.'

So, after all, Mr. Royston had not forgotten his old friend.

When we entered the house, Muriel went in search of her sister, and I remained alone. I did not see Judith until she came to my room to bid me good-night.

'Muriel has been confessing everything to me,'

she said, with a faint smile. 'She has been a foolish child; but I suppose we must forgive her.'

'I am afraid her chaperon needs forgiveness too.'

But I could see by her manner that she was not inclined to be hard on me.

'It was a mistake, perhaps, but it has made her happier; and, after all, perhaps it does not matter. Mr. Royston is going away, and before his return——'

But here she paused and left her sentence unfinished; but that ominous blank made me shiver. I knew what she meant: if her mother died they would at once leave The Nook. Leylands was in dangerous proximity to Walton; and Muriel must be removed from such an undesirable neighbourhood. A sense of uneasiness pervaded my rest that night. In my waking intervals I reviewed the situation. I began to think that Mr. Grenfell was right, and that Miss Hillyard's strong, inflexible nature would dominate the younger and weaker sister. She had sacrificed her own and her lover's happiness from a sense of duty, and she would exact the same sacrifice of Muriel.

From that day a secret fear assailed me, that Mrs. Hillyard would die before Mr. Royston's return. Judith seemed touched by the anxiety I manifested on her mother's account. Every day I questioned her minutely on the invalid's symptoms. I even suggested that, as money

was no object, the best physician should be procured from London. I remember she thanked me with tears in her eyes: another opinion would be a great relief to her, she frankly avowed that, but Mrs. Hillyard would refuse to speak to any strange doctor, or even to see him. A nurse was urgently required at the present moment; but the mere suggestion had brought on one of her worst paroxysms.

'Rebecca and I must go on to the end,' she added wearily. 'Perhaps, after all, it will not be for much longer. Dr. Morrison says she is certainly weaker, and that the present rally is only the flicker of the candle. He is perfectly honest and reliable, and he refuses to let us hope for any permanent improvement.'

I listened to her sadly; but the weeks passed on, and the invalid still lingered. I had heard twice from Mr. Royston. He wrote in a bright, chatty way, and gave me his impressions of 'the big young world,' as he called it, but he said very little about business. The seven weeks had nearly passed, and I was still at The Nook. Neither Judith nor Muriel would hear of my leaving them; and I was well content to remain. Sometimes I walked over with Mousquetaire to Walton to find some book or paper that I wanted and to have a little chat with Miss Trotter.

I paid one of these fleeting visits the very day term recommenced. I wanted, if possible, to see Mr. Royston, and to beg him to keep away from

Leylands on Sunday evenings, for I knew that if he showed his face in the church again Miss Hillyard would find some pretext for keeping Muriel at home. As I went in at the gate, I heard Mousquetaire barking in rather a vexed sort of way, and I saw a dark, good-looking young man standing at Mr. Royston's window snapping his fingers at him — a contemptuous familiarity that always provoked my wee doggie.

When I asked Miss Trotter if this were a new master, she looked surprised. 'Dear me, ma'am! haven't you heard from the poor young gentleman? Mr. Grenfell only said in his letter yesterday that you would be sure to know all about it.' But, as this remark only mystified me, she went on:

'It is sad how accidents happen; and such a fine strong young gentleman, too; never had a day's illness in his life. Dear, dear! that shows we must not boast in our palmiest days.'

But here I checked Miss Trotter's rambling sentences by demanding rather brusquely to see Mr. Grenfell's letter; and the good creature brought it at once.

I read it with dismay. Mr. Grenfell stated, in concise language, that his nephew had met with an unfortunate accident. He had fallen through an open trap-door in a narrow street or slum in New York, and had dislocated his shoulder and broken a couple of ribs. He mentioned the name of the hotel where they were staying,

and further added that under the circumstances he would be compelled to prolong his stay; and then he said that his nephew intended to write to me.

The young man I had seen was an Oxford friend of Mr. Royston, who had taken his place for the term and would occupy his rooms. When I received my letter the next day, I found the accident had happened fully a fortnight ago, and that they had telegraphed at once for a locum tenens, and he had arrived that very day. I wrote off to beg for further intelligence, but long before it arrived I had been obliged to communicate the bad news to Muriel. She was becoming restless, and at last she questioned me so closely that I could not evade the truth. She was dreadfully distressed, and of course magnified the accident tenfold; it was of no use to tell her that neither a dislocated shoulder nor broken ribs were absolutely dangerous; and her fears only increased when she heard that Mr. Grenfell had returned without him. To satisfy myself as we as her, I wrote to Onslow Square. Mr. Grenfell's reply came by return of post. He thanked me for my kind inquiries, but begged me to be perfectly easy about his nephew; he had quite recovered from his accident, and was as well as ever; but business of an important character had summoned him to Canada—this portion of the sentence was strongly underlined. His own business had obliged him to return, but he had been down to

Walton and made it right with the head-master. Mr. Ramsay was giving great satisfaction, and his nephew had an extension of absence granted him. Indeed, he scarcely expected to see him back until after Christmas.

I showed this letter to Muriel; she looked much relieved when she had read it, though her face was somewhat grave when Mr. Royston's prolonged absence was mentioned; but we had no time to discuss it, for a moment later a bell rang violently: Mrs. Hillyard had been taken suddenly with one of her attacks. It was the last. When night came on we were all gathered round her dying bed. Before the end came there was a brief rally; Dr. Morrison had just administered a restorative, when she opened her fast-glazing eyes and uttered her daughter's name.

'I am here, dearest mother. See, my arms are round you.'

'Judith,' still more feebly, 'Horace never did it. You must not be hard on the poor boy. Now you may kiss me, for I am so tired—so tired.'

And the next moment her head dropped heavily against her daughter's breast.

So tired! No wonder Judith's eyes were dry as she laid down the poor worn-out body; how could she grieve that that tormented, weary spirit was at rest? 'It is better so,' I heard her say as, later on, we put a few white flowers in the wasted hands. Yes, it was better so—better

that the poor distraught one should be sitting, clothed and in her right mind, at her Master's feet.

CHAPTER XII

THE SHADOWS FLEE

It was towards the end of October that Mrs. Hillyard died, but the close of the year still found us at The Nook.

I retained my rooms at Walton—they suited me so well that I was reluctant to give them up—but Mousquetaire and I seemed to be established permanently at Leylands; and it was an understood thing between us that I should remain with the sisters until they left England.

There was small chance of this at present. Judith's stern purpose had not been carried out; her strong will had been compelled to yield to the pressure of illness. The day after her mother's funeral she had a prolonged fainting-fit that alarmed us all, and for a month she had been unable, from sheer weakness, to raise her head from the pillow.

Muriel and I were with her night and day, for the old servant Rebecca was quite worn out from her exertions in nursing her mistress. Judith gave us very little trouble; she lay there in her helplessness, speaking seldom, only thanking us

gratefully now and again for our trouble. She was always docile and gentle, and took all we brought her in the form of medicine and nourishment without a murmur, but often when she believed herself alone she would clasp her thin hands together, and large, slow tears would roll down her cheeks; but I never dared question her about her trouble. Dr. Morrison had warned us against agitating talk: 'You must keep her quiet and give her nourishment every two hours,' he had said again and again.

She grew a little stronger presently, and then Rebecca, who seemed to have a man's strength in her gaunt, rugged frame, carried her down every day into the morning-room, and she would lie on her couch beside the window, looking out on the lawn and the leafless trees, and watching the robins and thrushes that came to the window-ledge for their daily modicum of crumbs.

One afternoon we were sitting together, and I had wheeled her couch round to the fireside: it was Christmas Eve, and Muriel had gone to the little church to decorate it with evergreens and holly—two or three of the village children were helping her—and I had been left in charge of Judith.

She had certainly made progress the last few days; perhaps the firelight had given her a tinge of colour, though she still looked shadowy and unsubstantial enough. With returning strength the old energy had revived, and I was grieved to

hear her speak of their departure from England as an absolute certainty.

'Dr. Morrison thinks that I shall be fit for the voyage by the end of April,' she said presently. 'I have been talking things over with him, and I mean to write to Horace and tell him to expect us about the middle of May. Nay, my dear old friend, you must not look sad about it: Horace wants us, and for Muriel's sake we must go as soon as possible.'

'Are you sure that you must go?'

'Quite sure'—rather restlessly. 'In a few weeks Mr. Royston will be back, and my poor child will be exposed to temptation: he will seek her out, and there will be the old painful scenes again. I must guard her from them; she is so young, and the ordeal is a cruel one. If I could only get stronger and we could leave Leylands!' And she sighed heavily.

I was spared a reply, for at that moment we heard the loud clanging of the door-bell and the sound of someone parleying with Hannah. If it had been Rebecca—for Hannah was slow-witted and singularly obtuse—the stranger, whoever he might be, would not have attained his end so easily.

As it was, Hannah threw open the door and announced 'A gentleman to see Miss Hillyard,' and the next instant Mr. Grenfell entered the room.

In her weakness Judith was not quite mistress

of herself, and the surprise was too great; I heard a low exclamation, 'Calvert!' then she sank back on the couch as pale as death. I saw a look of alarm cross Mr. Grenfell's face as he caught sight of the wasted features that still looked so lovely.

'Have you been ill?' he asked, in a voice of intense anxiety. 'Judith, have I startled you too much? Good heavens! can you not answer me? What has brought you to this?' grasping her hands, as he spoke, with a force and energy that brought a flush to her face.

She made a great effort to speak, when she saw his uncontrollable agitation; the very impetuosity of his greeting must have told her that she was still beloved.

'Yes, I have been ill,' she replied, in her soft, deep voice, 'and I am very weak still.—Miss Osborne,' addressing me nervously, 'there is no need for you to leave the room: Mr. Grenfell has doubtless come to speak about his nephew.'

But her eyelids fell before the keen look that seemed to read her through and through.

'Are you so sure of that? In my opinion, Bryan is quite able to speak for himself.' And there was a tone of suppressed triumph in his voice. 'Judith, I have something else to tell you. Why did you not trust me five years ago? Do you think I would have betrayed your confidence? Why did you not say to me that you believed Horace to be guilty?'

'What do you mean?' she returned, in a trembling voice; and I gave Mr. Grenfell a warning look as I passed him to fetch her some wine.

He took the glass from my hand and put it to her lips.

'Drink it,' I heard him say, in a low voice; 'but I have brought you a better cordial than that. Horace is innocent: you know I always told you so, but now I can prove it to you and the whole world.' And, as she fixed her dark eyes on his face with an expression of incredulous astonishment, he said, in a significant voice, 'We have found Jacob Dawson.'

I shall never forget the look on Judith's face when Mr. Grenfell mentioned that name. It was as though he had brought her the very elixir of life.

'Tell me—tell me quickly,' she gasped, 'what did he say? Oh, Calvert, if this be true, thank God! thank God!' And she could say no more.

It was a wonderful story that Mr. Grenfell told us in the twilight of this winter's afternoon, while the pine-logs blazed and spluttered on the hearth, and the ruddy flame lighted up his features. Judith lay back upon her pillows as she listened.

Mr. Royston's accident had proved a piece of good luck, for it had detained them in New York, and the very day before Mr. Grenfell intended

to start for England, leaving his nephew on the fair road to recovery, they heard something that induced Mr. Royston to apply for prolonged leave of absence, and to start for Canada as soon as possible.

He reached Quebec about the middle of October, but for some weeks his search for Jacob Dawson was unsuccessful. He travelled from place to place, visiting all sorts of outlying villages, until one evening he arrived at a rough wooden shanty that had been built in a clearing of the forest, where he met with rough but hearty hospitality from its owner, who proved to be no other than Jacob Dawson. Mr. Royston had informed his uncle that he was certainly a good sort of fellow, and that he seemed much concerned when he learned the grave suspicion that had rested on the young Squire. He remembered the circumstances perfectly, and could take his oath of the day and hour when the accident happened, for he had just parted with his old chum Ben Withers, and was on his way to catch the afternoon train that they told him would reach Liverpool that evening. Mr. Royston had made him narrate every circumstance of the day most minutely, and he was amazed to find how his account tallied with Silas Armstrong's and Horace Haldane's. Dawson perfectly remembered that his pipe went out, and that he stopped to beg a match of a young fellow who was chopping wood in a copse.

He was brushing through the underwood, when he saw a young man in a brown tweed coat standing with his back against a tree, evidently lost in thought; he had a gun leaning against his arm. He gave him a civil 'Good-morning' as he was about to pass him, and at the same moment a fine cock-pheasant whirred up between them, and he saw the Squire, as he called him, deliberately aim his gun at the bird. A groan and the fall of a heavy body near them made him start, and as he groped his way through the undergrowth, he was horrified to see a young man lying face downwards on the grass.

'The shot must have gone straight to the heart,' he told Mr. Royston, for he was quite dead when he lifted him up.

'It was a terrible business. I saw that by the Squire's face,' Jacob Dawson had added. 'If ever a man looked stricken, it was that poor young fellow when he stepped out of the bushes; and, partly to hearten him up, I said, "It is a bad job, master; but I saw it all plainly—the shot was not meant for him," or some such words. And then, as I was in a monstrous hurry, and there was no bringing a dead man to life again, and the Squire did not seem to hear a word that I said, I thought I would make tracks, and send the first person I could meet to help the poor young chap; but by ill-luck I never came across a creature the whole way to Stoke, and by the time I reached the station the train was up, and I had only just

time to jump in. There was a bit of a crowd there—a market or something of that sort—and no one noticed that I had forgotten to take my ticket.'

Jacob Dawson had shown plenty of rough feeling when Mr. Royston had narrated to him the history of the trial, and the strange restlessness that had sent Horace Haldane from his home a self-banished man, and had wrecked the peace and happiness of the family. He undertook, if only the Squire would pay the expenses of the two voyages across the Atlantic, to swear to his innocence in his sister's presence. But Mr. Royston had assured him that his written evidence, duly signed and witnessed, would be sufficient; and it was this document, drawn up and attested by a lawyer, that Mr. Royston had brought back with him to England.

I listened until Mr. Grenfell had finished his recital, and then, unperceived by Judith, I stole noiselessly from the room. I was no longer needed; the barrier between those two true hearts was now removed. Surely now they would understand each other!

There was a fire in the hall, and I sat down before it to wait for Muriel's return. Hector was stretched on the tiger-skin at my feet, and Mousquetaire was curled up into a black glossy ball beside him.

Hannah came presently and arranged the tea-table beside me, and lighted the swinging

lamp with its soft rose-coloured shade. She had just closed the door behind her, when I heard footsteps outside, and the next moment Muriel entered, bringing a rush of wild gusty air with her, and followed closely by Mr. Royston. A glance at Muriel's blushing face assured me that all was well. Then Mr. Royston caught hold of my hands in almost a boyish manner.

'Wish me joy,' he said; 'we have made it all right between us. Muriel has been begging my pardon for treating me so badly, and, of course, I have forgiven her.'

And, as he made this audacious speech, Muriel gave her old merry laugh, and knelt down on the rug beside me.

'Was it not clever of him to find Jacob Dawson?' she asked, glancing up at him shyly as he stood with his arm against the carved oaken mantelpiece, looking down upon us both. 'Bryan says if it had not been for his accident, he would never have come across the person who gave him the first clue.' And then, after a little more talk, she said reluctantly that she must go to Judith. But she came back again after a few minutes. 'Judith wanted to see Bryan,' she observed, and they went in together.

I went away to my own room presently. They would not miss me, I knew that; but by-and-by Muriel came to me of her own accord.

She did not speak to me at first, as she sat down in her favourite attitude at my feet and

shielded her face from the firelight, and I fell in with her mood and kept silence too; but presently I asked her what had become of Mr. Royston.

'He has gone,' she replied, in a dreamy tone. 'His uncle has taken him away. We were talking together, and Mr. Grenfell came out of the drawing-room and told Bryan that they must go. "Your sister is exhausted, and must rest for the remainder of the evening," he said to me; "but we are coming over to church to-morrow." I went to Judith, and she told me that they would certainly come to us after service. Think, dear Miss Osborne, what a Christmas Day it will be! We had been dreading it so, and, of course, it will be sad without poor mother; but I cannot help feeling that she is happy and knows everything, and one cannot wish her back. Oh, if only Horace could be with us to-morrow! But Judith says he will come soon; she is sure of that now.'

'Tell me, Muriel,' I said, in a teasing tone, as I stroked her bright hair, 'were you very much surprised when you saw Mr. Royston?'

And she fell into my trap very innocently. It was evidently a pleasure to her to recall every incident of this eventful afternoon.

'Oh, I will tell you about that,' she returned softly. 'Mrs. Mostyn had just left me to finish the chancel cross, but she promised to send old Betty presently to sweep up the leaves; so I was

all alone, but somehow I did not seem to mind. The church was very dark, for there were only two or three candles lighted; but I sat in the pew underneath the pulpit and worked on quite happily. Such nice thoughts seemed to come to me. I thought of dear mother and Beaver together; and, though it made me sad to think of Horace, something seemed to whisper deep down in my heart, "Supposing, after all, that Judith had made a mistake, and that the poor boy never meant to do it!" for somehow the darkness and stillness were so restful, and it was Christmas Eve, and the echo of the angels' song seemed to reach me. "Peace on earth," I murmured to myself, as I laid the prickly cross aside. "Will there be peace for us, too—for Judith, and Horace, and my poor Bryan?" And then all at once my heart gave a great leap, for the little side-door had swung open, and there was a rush of cold air. And then I felt as though I were in a dream, for someone was walking down the aisle, carrying his head very high; but just then the candles guttered and went out in the sudden draught, and it was quite dark. And still the footsteps came nearer, and I called out, "Don't frighten me, please. Speak, whoever you may be;" for, you know, I had not clearly seen his face. And then I heard Bryan laugh—his old delicious laugh—and the next moment his strong arms were round me, and I did not mind the darkness one bit.'

'And then, of course, you came home like sensible young people?'

'We did nothing of the kind,' she returned shyly. 'Bryan had some matches in his pocket, and we lighted the candles again, and sat down in the vestry, and he told me everything. Oh, what a wonderful story!—I could not help crying over it; and then Bryan scolded me, because, he said, I ought to be too happy to be with him to shed a single tear; but, of course, he was joking, for his own voice was not quite steady. I think we should have sat there until now, only old Betty began clattering up and down in her clogs, and coughing in a wheezy tone, and then Bryan got impatient, and said he should take me home. But I made him put on my ring first, the one he had given me in the summer; but he told me that he had bought me another in New York, which he said must be the real engaged ring, only I could wear both if I liked. It is very beautiful, is it not?' showing me the brilliant half-loop of diamonds; 'but, somehow, I like the old one best,' she finished, with a smile that it was a pity her lover could not see.

CHAPTER XIII

'CALVERT HAS FORGIVEN ME'

I DID not see Judith until late that night. She had been left alone by her own wish.

When I was at last admitted, I found her lying back in her chair by her bedroom fire. To my surprise, she had evidently been weeping, but she held out her hand to me with a lovely smile.

'You must have thought me very neglectful and selfish, my dear old friend,' she said, as she pointed to a chair near her. 'Sit down beside me. It is late, I know, but I am not ready for sleep yet, and I must talk to you a little.'

'There is no need to talk to-night,' I replied, looking at her anxiously, 'and the Hall clock is chiming eleven. Let me congratulate you, and then I will go.'

'Yes, you shall wish me joy,' she returned, still smiling; 'but I do not mean to part with you yet. I wished to be alone this evening; I sent Calvert away before he was ready to go. I wanted to realize my own happiness—to thank God for His inestimable mercies; and then there was my poor boy.'

'You have been writing to him?' for her little desk was open beside her.

'Yes, indeed; that was my first duty. Oh, Miss Osborne, do you think Horace will ever forgive me? Do you know how I have wronged him all these years? I was harder to him than his judges. I mistook his grief for remorse; in my heart I believed that he killed our poor darling in a fit of jealous rage, and nothing but Jacob Dawson's evidence would ever have banished this suspicion from my mind.'

'Dear Judith, it is terrible to think how you must have suffered.'

'Yes; but it was my own fault'—in a low, vehement voice. 'Calvert has convinced me of that now. He used to tell me in those old days that I was too hard on Horace—that we must make allowances for natures that are dissimilar from our own; but I never cared to hear him talk so. Beaver was so good and gentle; in all their disputes Horace had been the one to blame. Oh,' hiding her face with a shudder, 'what does the Bible tell us? "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer." For a time, I fear, I hated Horace; I could not bear him to come near me or touch me; and from that day when they carried Beaver home and laid him on his bed I have never kissed Horace. Calvert looked so grieved when I told him that.'

I was grieved too. No wonder she was worn, with such a terrible conflict. She read my unspoken sympathy in my eyes, and her face softened with an expression of exquisite tenderness.

'Why are you all so good to me? Calvert has forgiven me; he says the barrier is down, and that he shall never misunderstand me again. Oh, the utter rest when he told me this! That is how we shall feel if we ever attain heaven, when the white robes are given us, and the Father's smile is no longer hidden. If human forgiveness be so sweet, surely that will be sweeter still.'

'True, dearest.'

'I told Calvert so; and then I begged him to leave me. I could not be happy, even with him, until I had confessed my sin to Horace—until I had entreated him to forgive me too. That is how I have spent my evening. Now I am easier in my mind, and to-morrow—to-morrow Calvert will come to me again.'

This was all she said; and, though I sat there for another half-hour, speaking of many things, she did not again mention her lover.

Muriel's child-like nature had shown none of this reticence. But Judith's character was more intense; her strong, passionate love for the man she had given up needed no expression: it was a part of herself: it would live or die with her. I longed to ask her if the reconciliation were complete, and if she had again plighted her troth to him, but some undefined feeling kept me from asking the question.

I found as we walked together to church the next morning that Muriel was perplexing herself with the same question.

'I do not quite understand Judith,' she said, as we walked down the white, frozen road. 'Her manner is a little mysterious this morning. I was showing her my ring, and then I asked her if Mr. Grenfell would give her back hers, and she started and looked so pained. "No, no; he must not think of such a thing," she said in quite a shocked voice; "there is no ring needed between friends, and Calvert and I are only dear friends now;" and when I was about to remonstrate, she pushed me away, and begged me not to talk any more; and then you called me, and I was obliged to leave her. Dear Miss Osborne, what could she have meant? and she has loved him all these years.'

'We must wait until she explains herself more fully,' was my sage answer; but my uneasiness returned in full force. Happily, Muriel's thoughts were diverted at that moment by the appearance of the two gentlemen. I regarded Mr. Grenfell rather narrowly; he looked well and happy; there was content in his eyes, and as he asked after Judith his voice unconsciously softened. He seemed to me a different man—as though a load of care had been taken off his shoulders.

Judith was awaiting us in the morning-room when service was over. She greeted Mr. Grenfell with her usual quiet dignity, but it was evidently an effort to her, and her varying colour betrayed her emotion. Mr. Grenfell seemed anxious to meet her on her own ground. He

sat down beside her, and talked about the church decorations and the sermon, while Mr. Royston and Muriel were whispering together in the window.

If he wished to soothe her and put her at her ease, he certainly succeeded, for after a time she ceased to change colour with every word, and was soon talking quite happily with him; only just at last her nervousness returned. He had risen to take his leave, when I heard him say in a low, meaning voice, 'I shall come to-morrow, and then we will have our talk. You must not put me off as you did last night.' But to this she made no reply, and, after holding her hand for a moment, he left her without another word.

Muriel went to the afternoon service. I rather fancied from her manner that she and Mr. Royston had come to some sort of arrangement, but I was obliged to let her go alone. Judith had had a return of faintness soon after the gentlemen had left, and it was necessary for someone to stay with her.

I hoped she would sleep; but I soon found out that this was not her intention, for on looking up from my book I found her dark eyes fixed on my face rather wistfully.

'Should you mind if I were to talk to you a little?' she asked rather humbly. 'Sometimes one needs advice, and you are so wise and good; I know you will tell me what is the right thing to do.'

'How do you mean, my dear?' for I would not have understood her for the world; but I could see by the nervous fluttering of her hands that she was much distressed—some new complication or difficulty was threatening her new-found happiness.

I entreated her to repose full confidence in me, and she at once responded.

'I am very troubled,' she began. 'Last night I would not think of it; I kept all such thoughts at bay; I wanted only to be happy, and thank God for giving me back my friend. I seemed to desire nothing else. But men are not like us; they want more than we do.'

'Well?' for she had paused here.

'To-morrow Calvert is coming to talk to me, and I know what he will say. He tried to say it last night, only I stopped him; I told him I could only think of Horace. Friendship will not content him; he says we must be married without delay; that I owe it to him not to keep him without his wife any longer; and to-morrow he will come and say this again.'

'Well, dearest, there can be but one answer to that—you love him far too dearly to refuse such a reasonable request.'

'I love him too dearly to marry him,' she returned, in great agitation. 'Am I fit to marry anyone? Look at me now. Am I not a wreck? My health is gone, my nerves are weakened: these six terrible years have robbed me of more

than my youth and good looks. Miss Osborne, do not think of me, but only of him. He is strong, in the prime of life; a grand career is opening before him: is he to be dragged down by a sickly wife, who will have nothing but love to give him? No, his very generosity will make him plead with me. I must save him at any cost.'

'Judith,' I said, very quietly, 'you have asked my advice, and I will give it. To-morrow, when Mr. Grenfell comes, you will say to him all that you have said to me just now; put it before him as strongly as you will, let him read your very thoughts; and then abide by his decision.'

'But he may decide wrongly,' she returned, in her quick way.

'He will not. Every man knows what is best for his own happiness: he will be a better judge of that than you or I. All these years you have listened to your own pride, and now it is speaking to you again: it is telling you at this moment that it will be better for you both to suffer than to accept his lifelong support in your helplessness and weakness.'

'You are hard on me,' she whispered. 'If you only knew how I long to make him happy!'

'Tell him so, and place yourself in his hands. He is a man whom no woman need fear to trust with her fate.'

And I absolutely refused to listen to another word.

I thought it best to give Muriel a hint that Mr. Grenfell was expected; so when our early luncheon was over I was not surprised to hear that she had a pressing errand to the little village of Moreton.

It was a lovely afternoon, and the hard, white roads looked inviting under the December sunshine, and the black, unsightly hedgerows were sparkling with the glittering hoar-frost. I thought Muriel took a great deal of trouble to explain the exact road that she meant to take, but I fully understood her when Mr. Royston came with his uncle a quarter of an hour later; and I knew he would overtake her long before she reached her destination.

I spent a solitary afternoon, for even Mousquetaire had forsaken me, and his little legs were probably trying to keep up with Hector's majestic strides; but I was not dull: on the contrary, a sense of content and well-being stole over me as the shadows of the winter twilight closed round me.

After all, there is something real and satisfying even in reflected happiness; and, unless one's nature is eaten up by the canker-worm of selfishness, even a lonely middle-aged woman without close ties can find plenty of warm human interest. 'With what measure ye mete'—oh, the verity of those Divine words! It is because we sow our seed so sparingly that our harvest of love is so scanty. To love much—that is our life-duty;

and yet when we come to die our work will have been poorly done. Who will weep for us, when we have closed our hearts to our brothers and sisters, when we have failed to stretch out kindly hands of fellowship to our fellow-workers, or to share the burden of some poor overweighted toiler? 'With what measure ye mete.' Oh, well may we say from our hearts, in the words of our glorious Litany, 'From envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness'—that is, lovelessness—'Good Lord, deliver us!'

I was still alone when Muriel and Mr. Royston returned; but Muriel had hardly taken her place at the little tea-table before Mr. Grenfell joined us, and the next moment he told me in a whisper that Miss Haldane wished to speak to me. I saw by the light in his eyes that all was well; and the first glance at Judith's face corroborated this. She looked like a child tired out with overmuch happiness.

'He has settled it all,' she said, in a low voice, as I sat down beside her. 'He has been so good and patient with me. He let me tell him everything—all my miserable, hopeless feelings—before he said a word. I told him that all these years of sorrow and nursing had worn me out, and that I should never be the same Judith who used to walk with him through the Kilvington woods, and I showed him my gray hairs; but he only smiled, and said I needed him all the more to take care of me.'

'And you have promised to marry him?'

'How could I help it, when he convinced me that nothing else would make him happy; that he must have me beside him to cheer him in his daily work? Oh, what a wonderful thing love is!' she went on—'love like Calvert's, I mean. Do you know, he tells me that he would rather have me for his wife, even if I were never to leave this couch again, than any other woman in the world? He made me see that pain or sickness or any mere human infirmity should be no bar to two hearts that love each other. "It is you," he said, "your mind, your sympathy, your companionship, for which I have craved all these years, and the want of which has made this world seem such an empty place to me. Judith, you made one mistake in your life when you sent me from you; but you shall not make another." And after that I yielded.'

'For once in your life you have been a wise woman,' I said; but she only shook her head with a smile.

'I doubt the wisdom—we must have time to prove that—but I know my one prayer will be to make him happy.'

Mr. Grenfell had pressed for a speedy marriage; the early spring in so cold a climate would be injurious to Judith in her weakened state, and her doctor had already advised her removal to a warmer place; but nothing would induce Judith

to consent to it until her brother wrote to add his entreaties, and to state his intention of being present at the wedding.

We had said good-bye to Leylands and The Nook, and were settled in rooms at Kensington, when Horace Haldane arrived. I was not present at his meeting with his sisters. When I rejoined the family circle, I found him sitting by Judith's couch, with Mr. Grenfell opposite to them. He rose directly, and shook hands with me in a quick, embarrassed manner that recalled our first meeting at The Nook, but after a time he grew more sociable and at his ease, and we became great friends.

His singular likeness to Judith was still more apparent as I noticed him more closely. He was very handsome indeed. I had never seen a more striking-looking man; and his air of deep melancholy only added to his attraction. Before I had been long in his society I felt that adversity had done much for him; and Judith assured this to me with tears in her eyes.

'He reminds me of Beaver,' she said, with a sigh; 'he has grown so gentle and considerate. He seems to think so little of himself now. He has been telling me everything. For some years he was terribly reckless; the shock of Beaver's death and the misery of all that time seemed to rob him of his faith. He thought God and man were against him, and he cared nothing about his life. In spite of his innocence, the brand of Cain

seemed on him, and he had been driven forth an exile from his home.'

'Poor fellow!'

'Yes; and do you know who it was who saved him? Not his sister, for she believed that he was guilty. No, it was that noble creature Sibyl Grey who held out a helping hand to him, whose gentle sympathy lifted him out of the mire of despondency. At his worst moment, when he was sitting with companions who were far more lawless and reckless than he, a letter from Sibyl reached him. It was only a short letter, a few earnest womanly words, but it gave him just what he wanted and restored him to self-respect. "Do not despair," she wrote. "It was a cruel accident, but you must not let it spoil your life. If you were angry with him, you are not angry now. Ah, I know too well that if it were possible you would give your life for his; that you would lay it down, oh, so gladly!" And then when he wrote to thank her for those words, which he told her had saved him from sinking deeper, there came another letter, still more sweet and womanly, in which she bade him live nobly and well. "We have both suffered," she wrote. "If Beaver had lived I should have been his wife. I am not afraid of telling you this. He is in his grave, and his blest spirit is now in that other world where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage. You tell me, Horace, that you have spoiled my life. My dear brother—let me call you that once, for

Beaver's sake — you must not say that again. Though I have wept for him, though I sorrow, still I am not without consolation. Young as he was, he was fit to die. Death had not struck him down unprepared. Sometimes he used to tell me that he had an idea that he would never live to be old. I think he had a dread of sickness and death, for I remember he said once that he envied a soldier dying on the battle-field. 'Short and sharp—that is the fittest death for a man.' He was so good and brave; I think there was nothing he feared. Horace, let us live, you and I, caring for others, not for ourselves, that we may be worthy to join him in the higher life."'

'Judith,' I asked, as she paused, 'does your brother still care for Miss Grey?'

'He will always care for her,' she replied mournfully. 'All the Haldanes are tenacious in their attachments. When they love, it is for ever.'

'Do you think that now he will have a chance of winning her?'

But Judith hesitated.

'I cannot tell. They have not met for six years. She has lost her mother, and is very lonely. Horace is changed, as I said before. He has grown so like dear Beaver. One can never tell in these cases. If only Horace could be induced to go down to Kilvington! But I think Calvert will persuade him by-and-by.'

And then, as we heard voices approaching, the conversation broke off.

After all, Judith's fears were not without foundation, and for many a year her broken health was a cause of grave anxiety to her husband; but nothing could mar their intense happiness.

Mr. Grenfell rose high in his profession, and before many years were over he attained to the bench; and, in spite of her weak health, Lady Grenfell made their house a rendezvous for men of intellect and talent.

Judith was a woman who would have been leader of a salon in the old days. Clever men sought to converse with her, and old and young raved about her beauty. In society she was a little grave and queenly in her manners, and dispensed her favours and hospitality with unconscious condescension, but to her husband she was the meekest of women.

Blessed as Muriel was in her husband and children, her content was not deeper than her sister's. Though the Grenfells' home was childless, they were all in all to each other. I still kept my old rooms at Walton, but I was seldom there, except for a few weeks at a time; my time was spent either with Lady Grenfell in her luxurious London house, or in the pretty home at Clifton where the Roystons lived.

Now and then I went down to Kilvington, where Horace Haldane and his sweet-faced wife lived at

The Warren. Sibyl Grey had been won at last; pity for her old friend had developed into love, and Horace's marriage had followed his sister's within a year or two.

But it was long before his wife's influence induced him to take up his residence at The Warren. It was not until their twin sons were little lads of three years that he came back to his old neighbourhood.

When Horace Haldane first crossed the threshold of his old home, his sister, Lady Grenfell, was the first to greet him.

'Horace,' she whispered, as she took his hand, 'this must be the beginning of a new life to you; and, dear, there must be no shadows from the past. Beaver and our mother rest well. Hark how the bells are ringing! The people are glad to have their Squire back again. Sibyl, let me look at the boys. What fine fellows! Finer, even, than Muriel's. And now tell me, my dear brother, which is Horace, and which is Beaver? Nay, I know—this must be Beaver,' laying her hand on one fair curly head.

'Yes, you are right, Judith,' returned her brother, with a touch of sadness in his tone; 'Sibyl would have it so. Horace, tell your aunt how dearly you love Beaver. I never saw such a fellow,' he continued, jesting to hide deeper feelings. 'He will give up his toys if Beaver only expresses a wish for them. They are never happy apart. We are obliged to let them sleep

together. Never were brothers so devoted to each other.'

He finished with a sigh that was gently echoed by Sibyl, though the next moment she looked up in her husband's face with a loving smile.

THE END

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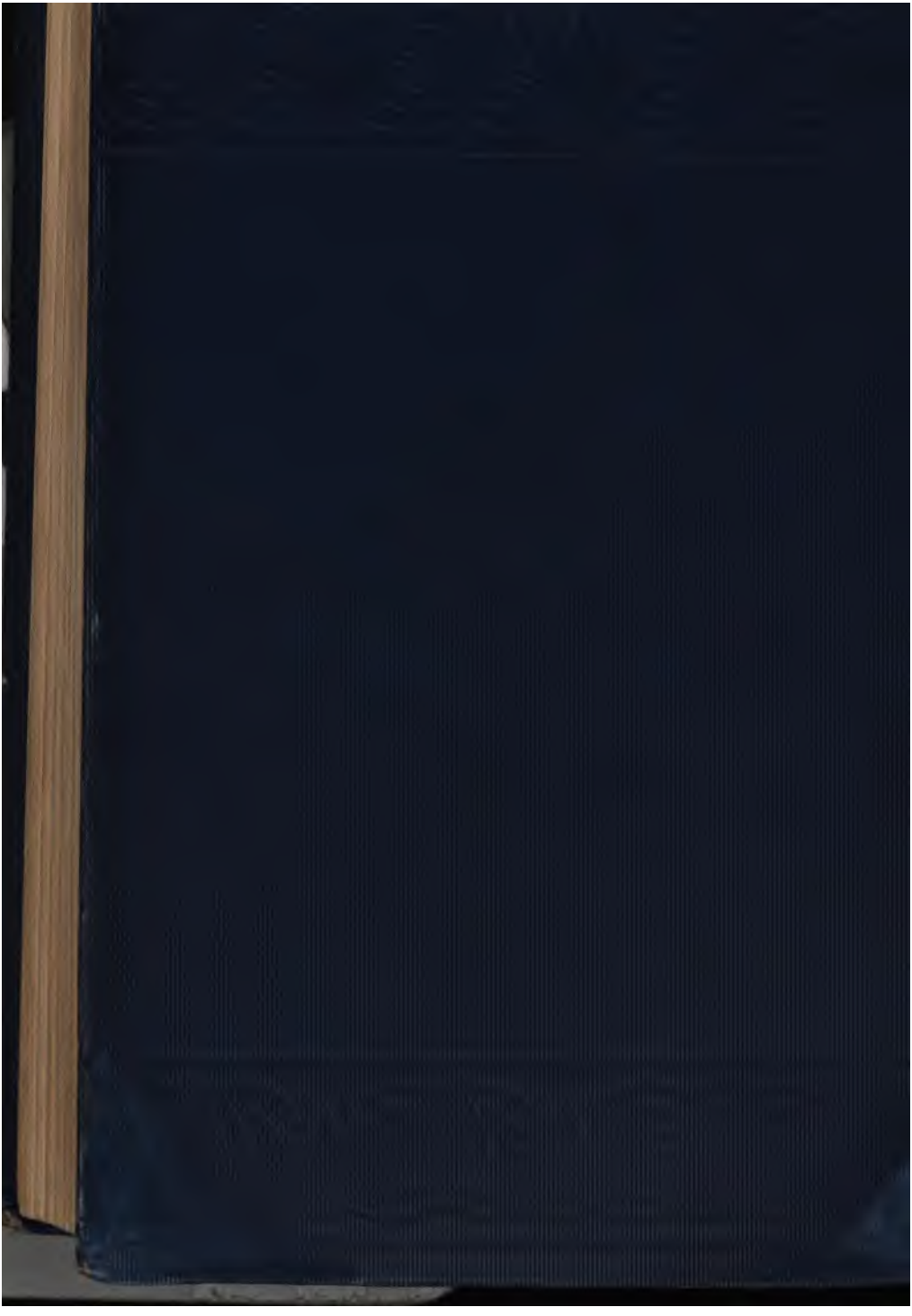
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